

CHICKEN SCRATCH

TEN MINUTE PLAY

By Burton Bumgarner

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SYNOPSIS: In this brief tale of crime and bad art, a painting is stolen from the home of Mr. Horton Hearsahoo, a collector of contemporary art. Critics and art thieves believe it to be the work of a great abstractionist, but in fact it is the work of Mr. Hearsahoo's six year old son who flunked out of junior art school.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(1 MAN, 1 WOMAN)

ACTOR 1 (m)Horton Hearsahoo, Arty the Art Thief,
Policeman, Freddy the Fence
ACTOR 2 (f).....Minerva the Maid, The Boss, Mr.
Dünnerbaum

COSTUMES

Horton HearsahooBathrobe, pipe
Arty the Art thief.....Hoodie, sunglasses
Policeman.....Policeman's jacket, hat, sunglasses
Freddy the Fence.....Beret, scarf
Minerva the Maid.....Apron, wig
The BossTacky blazer, clip on tie, goofy glasses
Dr. DünnerbaumCape, hat, glasses

SET

- ☐ A wingback chair
- ☐ An end table
- ☐ An easel with an abstract painting that looks like it was painted by a kindergartener.

PROPS

- ☐ Tea cup
- ☐ Newspaper
- ☐ Captain Crunch box
- ☐ Note pad for Policeman

PRODUCTION NOTES

Two actors, male or female, portray seven characters. Costume props are laid out on a table upstage with each character identified. Changes are made quickly on stage.

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Do Not Copy

AT RISE:

ACTOR 1 enters and crosses to the prop table. He puts on a bathrobe, takes a newspaper and crosses to the chair. He sits and reads. ACTOR 2 enters and crosses to the prop table, puts on an apron and a wig, takes a tea cup and crosses to ACTOR 1

ACTOR 2: (As MINERVA.) Your tea, Mr. Hearsahoo.

ACTOR 1: (As MR. HEARSAHOO.) Thank you, Minerva. (Takes teacup, sips, puts tea on end table.)

ACTOR 2: Will there be anything else, sir? Liver and onions? Fried eggplant? Captain Crunch and sour cream?

ACTOR 1: No, thank you, Minerva. (Indicating the painting.) I see the painting arrived.

ACTOR 2: Yes, sir.

ACTOR 1: Any suggestions where we should display it? The library? Or perhaps the foyer? (Pronounced foi-YAY.)

ACTOR 2: How about in the garage or at the bottom of the bird cage?

ACTOR 1: What do you see in the painting, Minerva?

ACTOR 2: (Studies the painting.) I think it looks like chicken scratch, sir.

ACTOR 1: That's a very astute observation. Mrs. Hearsahoo wants it displayed in a prominent place.

ACTOR 2: I believe there's a spot available behind the refrigerator.

ACTOR 1: By the way, Mrs. Hearsahoo, Junior Hearsahoo and I will be traveling to our summer home, Hearsahoo Haven in the Hamptons this weekend.

ACTOR 2: Good for you, sir. You deserve a vacation.

ACTOR 1: You will be in charge of the house. Remember, this house is full of valuable works of art. I have one of the finest collections of contemporary art in the city.

ACTOR 2: I know, sir. You keep telling me over and over and over.

ACTOR 1: (Stands.) I will see you again in two days. (They shake hands.) It's a difficult assignment, but I know you're up to it.

Crosses to prop table where he becomes ARTY THE ART THIEF.

ACTOR 2: (*Sarcastic.*) Remember, this house is full of valuable works of art, Minerva. I have one of the finest collections of contemporary art in the city, Minerva. You have a very important job, Minerva. Blah, blah, blah. I thought he'd never leave. Let's see. What am I forgetting? Oh, well. I think I'll take a nap.

Crosses to prop table and becomes THE BOSS. ACTOR 1 crosses DWC, looks around, confused, then takes out a phone and dials.

ACTOR 1: (*As ARTY.*) Hey, boss. I'm in the Park Avenue place. The maid's taking a nap in the master bedroom. She forgot to turn on the house alarm. So what the heck am I looking for? (*ACTOR 2 crosses downstage as THE BOSS talking on a cell phone.*)

ACTOR 2: (*As THE BOSS.*) You're looking for a famous painting.

ACTOR 1: This place is full of paintings. Which one am I looking for?

ACTOR 2: Look for a painting by a famous painter.

ACTOR 1: I don't know no famous painters.

ACTOR 2: How can you be an art thief if you don't know anything about painters?

ACTOR 1: I just steal it. I don't know nothing about it.

ACTOR 2: Look for something by Pablo Picasso. Or Andy Warhol.

ACTOR 1: There's one here that looks like a snake and half a lady's hat. I don't see nothing about no Pablo Pastrami or Andy the Warthog.

ACTOR 2: This guy Hearsahoo is supposed to have the largest private collection of modern art in the city. Grab the nearest painting and meet me in the alley behind the warehouse.

ACTOR 1 takes the painting from the easel and crosses to the prop table, quickly changes back to MINERVA, takes the box of Captain Crunch and crosses to the chair. ACTOR 2 crosses to the prop table, removes ARTY costume and becomes POLICEMAN.

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ACTOR 2: (As MINERVA.) Well, that was certainly refreshing. Nothing like a nap on a bed that costs more than most people's houses. And what's the best thing to enjoy after a nap? Captain Crunch. (*Eats a handful of cereal, looks at the easel.*) Hmm. I wonder what happened to that ugly painting. (*Looks left and gasps.*) The front door is open! There's muddy footprints on the carpet! Somebody took the Captain Crunch! (*Shouts.*) WE'VE BEEN ROBBED!

ACTOR 2 crosses to ACTOR 1 and makes notes.

ACTOR 1: (As POLICEMAN.) Can you describe the missing objects, ma'am?

ACTOR 2: A really ugly painting and a case of Captain Crunch.

ACTOR 1: Would that be Peanut Butter Crunch, Cinnamon Roll Crunch, Chocolatey Crunch, Crunch Berry Crunch, or regular?

ACTOR 2: Are you kidding? (*Holds out the cereal box. POLICEMAN takes a handful and eats.*) Regular crunch. But I think the painting might be a bit more crucial.

ACTOR 1: (*Chewing cereal.*) You could be right. Can you describe the missing painting?

ACTOR 2: Not really.

ACTOR 1: Try.

ACTOR 2: Okay. Imagine all of those different kinds of Captain Crunch mixed with dog food and hot dog chili and smeared on a canvas by a gang of toddlers on a sugar rush.

ACTOR 1: You're saying this painting is kind of abstract?

ACTOR 2: Just a bit.

ACTOR 1: I've never understood this modern art. Of course, I don't understand any other kind of art either.

ACTOR 2: I know what you mean.

ACTOR 1: Can you give me a word to describe this work of art?

ACTOR 2: I told you already. Five different kinds of Captain Crunch, dog food, hot dog chili and toddler attitude.

ACTOR 1: I need something a little easier to put in the report.

ACTOR 2: Okay. How about chicken scratch?

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ACTOR 1: Good enough. I have no idea what chicken scratch looks like, but that's what we'll go with. By the way, where's the owner of this place?

ACTOR 2: Mr. Hearsahoo is vacationing at Hearsahoo Haven, his home in the Hamptons.

ACTOR 1: Hearsahoo? Would that be Mr. Horton Hearsahoo?

ACTOR 2: Yes. This is the Horton Hearsahoo house.

ACTOR 1: Who, besides Mr. Horton Hearsahoo, lives here?

ACTOR 2: Mrs. Horton Hearsahoo and their nasty little son, Junior Hearsahoo. Mr. Hearsahoo trusted me to take care of things until he returned. He'll be so disappointed in me.

ACTOR 1: I'm sure he will be. You lost a priceless painting AND a fine product manufactured by the Quaker Oats Company. Some of their best work, I might add.

ACTOR 2: There's only one thing left to do.

ACTOR 1: (*Alarmed.*) Don't do anything you'll regret. If you need to talk with someone, I'll give you the hotline number. No matter how bad it seems now, it can only get worse. The night is always darkest just before the storm. Just because you're a huge disappointment to everyone around you doesn't mean you can't get any better.

ACTOR 2: I don't need the hotline number. I'm going to take another nap. (*Crosses to the prop table, leaves the cereal and becomes THE BOSS.*)

ACTOR 1: I need to file a report and talk about procedure and strategy with my fellow law enforcement officers. I'll be at the donut shop.

ACTOR 1 crosses to the prop table, becomes FREDDY THE FENCE and crosses downstage. ACTOR 2 brings the painting downstage and places it on the easel.

ACTOR 2: (*As THE BOSS.*) What d'ya think, Freddy?

ACTOR 1: (*As FREDDY THE FENCE*) Wow!

ACTOR 2: It's really something, ain't it?

ACTOR 1: It really is something.

ACTOR 2: Worth a lot of money on the black market, right?

ACTOR 1: It really is something.

ACTOR 2: What d'ya think? Quarter of a million? Half a million? A whole million? A whole million and some change?

ACTOR 1: It really is something.

ACTOR 2: Can you say something besides it really is something?
Everything is something.

ACTOR 1: Except nothing.

ACTOR 2: Well, that's true.

ACTOR 1: I might have a buyer. The trouble is, I can't quite identify this work. It could be a Pauline Paducah Pragmeyer from her Perturbed in Paris period, or Federico Fellini Ferlinghetti from his Sweaty Spaghetti period, or maybe even Alonso Aloysius Alcott from his Albuquerque a la Mode period. That would be very rare.

ACTOR 2: I got no idea what you're talking about.

ACTOR 1: I'm talking about modern art. Post-impressionism. Expressionism. Cubism. Futurism. Constructivism. Surrealism. Deconstructivism. Don't you know anything about art history?

ACTOR 2: No. I just steal stuff.

ACTOR 1: Fencing stolen art is in itself an art. My clients collect it for the pure thrill of collecting that which is uncollectable. Stolen art! And I help them obtain that which they cannot have.

ACTOR 2: But if you get it for them, then they CAN have that which they cannot have.

ACTOR 1: That's true. They CAN have that which they cannot have.

ACTOR 2: They sound like spoiled brats.

ACTOR 1: They are spoiled brats. I have supplied spoiled brats with paintings by Pollock, Lichtenstein, Severini. I've even fenced a Matisse and a Cézanne. But I have never seen the likes of this. *(Indicates the painting.)* This is the work of a genius! Or a moron. Either way I may have a buyer.

ACTOR 2: Who?

ACTOR 1: I can't tell you.

ACTOR 2: How much is it worth?

ACTOR 1: I have no idea.

ACTOR 2: How soon can you find out?

ACTOR 1: I don't know.

ACTOR 2: You ain't exactly a bundle of information.

ACTOR 1: I can't help it.

ACTOR 2: Okay. See what you can do. But hurry it up. I need to make a payment on my jet ski.

*ACTOR 2 crosses to prop table and becomes DR. DÜNNERBAUM.
ACTOR 1 dials on cell phone.*

ACTOR 1: I have something that may be of interest to Dr. Dünnerbaum ...No, I'm not calling from AT&T. Tell the doctor that Freddy may have something of interest and to meet me in the usual undisclosed location ...No, this isn't about a VISA card. Just tell the doctor that Freddy called! If Dr. Dünnerbaum isn't interested, I know a couple other doctors with funny German-sounding names that may be interested! I'm hanging up now because I'm finding you very annoying.

ACTOR 2 crosses downstage as DR. DÜNNERBAUM, and admires the painting.

ACTOR 2: (As DÜNNERBAUM.) So, you called me away from my very important work to see this?

ACTOR 1: What important work? You own a fast food joint.

ACTOR 2: (Indignant.) It isn't a fast food joint! It's the Dünnerbaum Diner! And it's a delicious and delectable design for dispensing to diners delightful digestible diets of delicately distinguished dishes.

ACTOR 1: You sell hamburgers that cost a hundred dollars a piece.

ACTOR 2: And I sell a lot of hamburgers for a hundred dollars a piece. That's why I can afford my private art collection.

ACTOR 1: (Indicating the painting.) What do you think of the painting? A Pauline Paducah Pragmeyer from her Perturbed in Paris period? Federico Fellini Ferlinghetti from his Sweaty Spaghetti period? Dare I say it: an Alonso Aloysius Alcott from his Albuquerque a la Mode period?

ACTOR 2: It's too poignant for Pragmeyer, too flamboyant for Ferlinghetti, and not abstract enough for Alcott. I think...

ACTOR 1: (Excited.) Yes? YES? (Moves closer and closer to ACTOR 2 until finally he's too close for comfort.) What? WHAT?

ACTOR 2: You are violating my personal space.

ACTOR 1: Remarkable title! I can see the linear spaces moving transparently into the horizontal spaces.

ACTOR 2: I mean YOU are violating my personal space. (*Shoves ACTOR 1 away.*) Don't stand so close to me!

ACTOR 1: Sorry. What about the painting?

ACTOR 2: It could be one of the lost works by the Russian abstraction-absurdist Abraham Alabamoff.

ACTOR 1: Alabamoff?

ACTOR 2: Yes. He was from southern Russia. After he was committed to a mental hospital, he painted farm animals. This looks a whole lot like his almost-famous Portrait of a Chicken. Where did you get this painting?

ACTOR 1: You know I can't answer that. Why did you ask?

ACTOR 2: Because it's in the script. (*Runs to the prop table and returns with a script and shows it to ACTOR 1.*) See? Page seven. ACTOR 2 asks ACTOR 1 "where did you get this painting"?

ACTOR 1: And what does ACTOR 1 say?

ACTOR 2: "You know I can't answer that. Why did you ask?"

ACTOR 1: Then I'd say we're right on track. So what about the painting? Is it the almost-famous Portrait of a Chicken by Tennesseeoff?

ACTOR 2: It's Alabamoff. And there's no way I can be certain. It could be a forgery. But who would forge a painting that's almost famous when the same amount of time and effort could go into forging a painting that IS famous? Except that the famous forgery could facilitate the forces of law enforcement and could in fact foil the forger and the forgee.

ACTOR 1: A fascinating yet factual formularization.

ACTOR 2: Thank you. With your permission, I will take the painting to an acquaintance who will know better than me the identity of the genius...or the moron...who created this brilliant...or idiotic...work of art...or garbage. (*ACTOR 2 takes the painting to the prop table.*)

ACTOR 1: Don't I get a receipt? Actually, I guess one wouldn't want a receipt for a stolen work of art. Should I be arrested, I would have the right to remain silent, but should I give up the right to remain silent, it could be used against me in a court of law. Then I would have the right to an attorney. And if I couldn't afford an attorney, one would be appointed for me. (*Looks at watch.*) Oh, man. "Law and Order" (*Or other popular police show.*) is on!

Quickly crosses to the prop table and becomes HEARSAHOO and runs to the chair and sits. ACTOR 2 crosses DSR and pretends to ring a doorbell.

ACTOR 2: Ding dong!

ACTOR 1: (*As HEARSAHOO.*) Minerva. Someone is at the door.

ACTOR 2: Can't you answer it?

ACTOR 1: Of course I can't answer it! That's why I pay Minerva.

ACTOR 2 runs back to the prop table, becomes MINERVA, leaves the painting and crosses DSL.

ACTOR 2: I'll answer the door, sir. You just sit there and read your paper. It's no bother. No bother at all. I was just cleaning Captain Crunch up off the floor.

Crosses right, then quickly crosses to the prop table, becomes DÜNNERBAUM, takes the painting, and crosses DSR.

ACTOR 2: (*As DÜNNERBAUM.*) Good evening. I'd like to see Mr. Horton Hearsahoo.

Takes the painting, runs back to the table, becomes MINERVA and runs DSR.

ACTOR 2: (*As MINERVA to ACTOR 1.*) Someone to see you, sir.

ACTOR 1: I'm very busy, Minerva.

ACTOR 2: (*As if talking to DÜNNERBAUM.*) He's very busy.

Quickly crosses to the table and becomes DÜNNERBAUM, takes the painting and runs DSR.

ACTOR 2: *(As DÜNNERBAUM, as if talking to MINERVA.)* It's very important.

Takes the painting, quickly crosses to the table, becomes MINERVA, quickly crosses DSR.

ACTOR 2: *(As MINERVA, to ACTOR 1.)* He says it's important.

ACTOR 1: Very well. Show him in.

ACTOR 2 quickly crosses to the prop table, becomes DÜNNERBAUM, takes the painting and crosses DSR, then crosses to ACTOR 1, panting.

ACTOR 1: Dr. Dünnerbaum, *(To audience.)* proprietor of the Dünnerbaum Diner and sometimes despicable dealer of discount stolen art, it's good to see you. *(They shake hands.)* Goodness, you're out of breath.

ACTOR 2: *(Painting.)* I seem to be running around a lot. Anyway, I have something to show you.

ACTOR 1: *(Shocked by the painting.)* Good heavens!

ACTOR 2: Are you familiar with this painting?

ACTOR 1: I'll say I am! Where did you get that?

ACTOR 2: As you well know, I cannot reveal my sources. But I have to know. What is it?

ACTOR 1: It's Chicken Scratch.

ACTOR 2: I mean, who is the artist? *(With increasing excitement.)* Is it Pragmeyer? Ferlinghetti? Alcott? Or, dare I say it, is this a lost Alabamoff?

ACTOR 1: You can say anything you want. But first, sit down and rest a bit. I'll have Minerva bring you something cool to drink.

ACTOR 2: Somehow I don't think I'd find that refreshing.

ACTOR 1: Nonsense. *(Calls out.)* Minerva! Come to the study!

ACTOR 2: Please don't go to any trouble.

ACTOR 1: It's not trouble at all.

ACTOR 2: Not for you maybe.

ACTOR 1: Minerva!

ACTOR 2: Oh, okay.

Jumps up and runs to the prop table, becomes MINERVA and returns DSL.

ACTOR 2: *(As MINERVA.)* Yes, sir.

ACTOR 1: Good heavens, Minerva. You're out of breath also. There must be a lot of ozone in the air today.

ACTOR 2: *(Rudely.)* What d'ya want? *(Suddenly polite.)* I mean, what might I do for you, sir?

ACTOR 1: Dr. Dünnerbaum needs something cool to drink. A glass of iced tea or perhaps lemonade. *(Looks at the chair.)* Nowm where did he go? *(Crosses far right looking for DÜNNERBAUM.)*

ACTOR 2: I'll get your lemonade.

Quickly crosses to the prop table, becomes Dünnerbaum and returns to the chair.

ACTOR 1: *(Looking around.)* Dr. Dünnerbaum! Where are you? Come out, come out, wherever you are! *(Sees ACTOR 2 in the chair.)* Ah. There you are. *(Crosses center.)*

ACTOR 2: About the painting, Mr. Hearsahoo. You called it Chicken Scratch.

ACTOR 1: Actually, my housekeeper, Minerva, gave it that name. I thought the painting was lost.

ACTOR 2: Wait. You said Minerva gave the painting the title?

ACTOR 1: Well, yes. She said it looked like chicken scratch, and I had to agree with her.

ACTOR 2: So you had the nerve to give an untitled painting a name? *(Stands and paces.)* Of all the abject, absurd, arrogant, asinine, atrocious, audacious... *(Searches for another word.)*

ACTOR 1: How about awful?

ACTOR 2: Awful thing to do! How dare you take it upon yourself to give a name to one of this century's not-so-great artists!

ACTOR 1: I didn't call it chicken scratch. Minerva did.

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ACTOR 2: (*Shocked.*) All the worse! A lowly housekeeper!

ACTOR 1: Actually, she has degrees from the Harvard School of Business and the Harvard School of Law.

ACTOR 2: Then why isn't she out running a corporation or practicing law?

ACTOR 1: The stress was too much for her. Besides, she's an excellent housekeeper. Even though she buys way too much Captain Crunch. Where did you get this painting?

ACTOR 2: You know I can't answer that. Why did you ask?

ACTOR 1: Because it's in the script. (*Runs to the prop table and returns with a script and shows it to ACTOR 2.*) See? Page ten.

ACTOR 1 asks ACTOR 2, "Where did you get this painting?"

ACTOR 2: And what does ACTOR 2 say?

ACTOR 1: "You know I can't answer that. Why did you ask?" Where is Minerva with that lemonade?

ACTOR 2: Forget the lemonade! Tell me about Chicken Scratch.

ACTOR 1: Well, on farms, chickens scratch around on the ground...

ACTOR 2: I mean the painting! Is it valuable?

ACTOR 1: Good heavens, no.

ACTOR 2: No?

ACTOR 1: No.

ACTOR 2: Not even a little bit valuable?

ACTOR 1: It's even less than valuable. When Mrs. Hearsahoo, Junior and I returned from Hearsahoo Haven in the Hamptons, I thought Minerva had thrown it out.

ACTOR 2: So you've seen it before?

ACTOR 1: Of course I've seen it before. (*Places the painting on the easel.*) It was right there when we left for the Hamptons.

ACTOR 2: Who exactly is the creator of this painting?

ACTOR 1: Why, my son, Junior Hearsahoo.

ACTOR 2: But your son is four years old.

ACTOR 1: He's six years old. Just immature for his age. He attended a very exclusive school for the visual arts. This was his entry into the first grade art competition. Needless to say, it came in last.

ACTOR 2: Your six year-old attends an exclusive school for the visual arts?

ACTOR 1: Well, not anymore. Not after this. (*Indicates the painting.*)
He was heartbroken. Mrs. Hearsahoo tried to tell him it was lovely,
and she had it framed and said I would place it near some of my
great paintings. I told her I'd do no such thing, and she locked me
out of the house until I agreed to hang the thing in a prominent
place. (*Hands the painting to ACTOR 2.*) Here. You seem to like it.

ACTOR 2: What am I supposed to do with it?

ACTOR 1: Pass it off as a lost Abraham Alabamoff. Chicken Scratch.

ACTOR 2: How about if I pass it off as a work of an emerging young
genius named Junior Hearsahoo?

ACTOR 1: Hmm. That would make his mother happy. Of course,
he's now attending a very exclusive elementary school for
taxidermy.

ACTOR 2: Nothing is quite as beautiful as nature, even if it's dead.

ACTOR 1: You know, Dr. Dünnerbaum, you may have something
there. We'll call it primitive expressive environmental anti-
impressionism.

ACTOR 2: I'll go hang this in my diner. You get Junior some canvas
and paintbrushes.

ACTOR 1: I think we're on to something. (*They shake hands and
exit.*)

BLACKOUT.

THE END