

FISHBOWL

ONE ACT PLAY

By Donald Tongue

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SYNOPSIS: Actors have taken the stage for opening night, but a personal relationship breakup between two of the actors causes the show to fall apart and it requires the intervention of an agent, two directors, and the playwright to try and salvage the play. This comedic play-within-a-play invites the audience into the action and leaves them momentarily wondering what is real life and what is theatre. Easy staging and excellent for flexible casting

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(FLEXIBLE CAST OF 3-7: 2 MEN, 1 WOMAN, 4 EITHER)

WOMAN Plays two characters—the actor, Helen, who does a great fish face imitation, and Sandy, the character she is supposed to be performing. *(94 lines)*

MAN ONE Plays two characters—the actor/boyfriend and Steve, the character he is supposed to be performing. Also can play James Miller, the playwright. *(75 lines)*

MAN TWO Plays two characters—the actor/ex-boyfriend and Rich, the character he is supposed to be performing. Can also play the agent, initial director, and new director. *(81 lines)*

SETTING: The present stage and theatre in which the play is being performed.

SET: Three chairs center stage.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This play works well as a small ensemble piece for three actors, but the cast could be easily expanded to accommodate up to seven actors. With limited changes in dialogue, the roles of Agent, Playwright, Director and New Director are gender-flexible.

1. WOMAN Helen, the girlfriend
 Sandy, the character she is performing
2. MAN ONE The boyfriend
 Steve, the character he is performing
3. MAN TWO The ex-boyfriend
 Rich, the character he is performing
4. Agent (m/f)
5. Playwright (m/f)
6. Director (m/f)
7. New Director (m/f)

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Fishbowl was first performed in the 2010 Short Play Festival at the Manhattan Repertory Theatre in New York, NY. The production was directed by the playwright, Donald Tongue, and performed by Jay Devore as MAN TWO, Lauren Piselli as WOMAN, and Matthew Bryan Feld as MAN ONE.

FISHBOWL

Lights up on three actors, center stage, sitting closely together on chairs, from stage left to right: MAN ONE, WOMAN, MAN TWO.

WOMAN: *(As Sandy, to MAN ONE.)* Hi.

MAN ONE: *(As Steve.)* Hi.

Pause.

WOMAN: *(Aside, to MAN TWO.)* It's your line.

MAN TWO: *(Sulking.)* I know it's my line. You don't have to tell me -
I know!

WOMAN: *(Beat, to MAN TWO.)* Well.

MAN TWO: Well what?

WOMAN: *(Beat.)* Maybe we should start over. *(As Sandy, to MAN ONE.)* Hi.

MAN ONE: *(As Steve.)* Hi.

MAN TWO: *(To WOMAN.)* I can't believe you broke up with me.

MAN ONE: *(To WOMAN.)* You broke up with him?

MAN TWO: *(To MAN ONE.)* Yeah. Backstage. Right before we took our places she turns to me and says - I think it's best if we stop seeing each other.

WOMAN: I'm sorry. I knew after the show you'd want to go out and it would be awkward then to...to...

MAN ONE: *(To MAN TWO.)* I think what she's trying to say is - she wanted to make a clean break before getting caught up in all the after show expectations...

WOMAN: Right. I figured later you'd be all excited and it would be harder to break it off...

MAN TWO: So, instead, you decided to cut my heart open before the show so you could come out here and watch me slowly bleed to death - pretending nothing has happened.

Pause.

WOMAN: Let's start over. *(As Sandy, to MAN ONE.)* Hi.

MAN ONE: (As Steve.) Hi.

MAN TWO: Hold on. Is there something going on between you two?

WOMAN looks at MAN ONE. MAN ONE shakes his head.

WOMAN: No.

MAN ONE: No.

MAN TWO: No, there is something. You two have been seeing each other behind my back, haven't you?

MAN ONE: No. That's crazy. I wouldn't do that...

MAN TWO: How long?

WOMAN: (*Spiteful.*) We went out for coffee after the auditions.

MAN ONE: It was just coffee...

WOMAN: And then to my apartment.

MAN TWO: Since the auditions? That was two months ago.

MAN ONE: Two and a half.

MAN TWO: Oh. Thank you. Yes. Thank you for being so precise on exactly how long you have been MESSING AROUND WITH MY GIRLFRIEND!

WOMAN: Okay, guys? We've got to get past this. We have a show to perform. So let's try to get through the opening scene - you know - the audition.

MAN TWO: (*A bit crazed.*) Huh, yeah - right. Like I could do the audition scene now.

MAN ONE: I told you not to tell him before the show.

WOMAN: You did not.

MAN ONE: Did too.

WOMAN: Did...Well, let's just do the show and we can talk about this later.

MAN TWO: What's the point?

WOMAN: The point is...this is a theater - not an aquarium. Like my acting coach always said, "Audiences don't come to see fish aimlessly swimming around in a fishbowl."

MAN TWO: You enjoy watching my beta fish; the way it swims in and out of the miniature shipwreck.

MAN ONE: I've seen your fish. It's not that impressive.

WOMAN: (*Frustrated.*) GUYS! We need to start the show. Okay.

(*Beat.*) Okay. (*As Sandy, to MAN ONE.*) Hi.

MAN ONE: (*As Steve, over acting.*) Hi!

A beat waiting for MAN TWO's line, MAN TWO stands.

MAN TWO: (*To audience.*) I'm sorry to disappoint you. I wish I could find a way to forget what has just happened and go on with the show, like, you know - the show must go on - but...but I can't. I...I can't do this.

MAN TWO exits quickly.

MAN ONE: I told you it wasn't the right time to...

WOMAN: You did not. You said you weren't sure.

Pause.

MAN ONE: I'll go see if I can talk to him or...something.

MAN ONE exits.

WOMAN: (*To audience.*) Hi?...I wish I had a shipwreck...to hide in. (*Nervous laugh.*) Ha. Great. My first show and I find myself being jealous of a stupid fraternity fish.

AGENT/MAN TWO enters from stage left as agent with cell phone, wearing a bathrobe. It is clear that AGENT/MAN TWO is calling from somewhere else. AGENT/MAN TWO dials cell phone. It rings. WOMAN takes out her cell phone.

AGENT/MAN TWO: (*Into cell phone.*) So, baby, I just got a call from the stage manager and he tells me things aren't going so well. Do you hear me? Hey! Are you there?

WOMAN: *(Into cell phone.)* Yes! Yes, I'm here. I don't know what to do. I'm out here on stage by myself and the audience is just staring at me and...

AGENT/MAN TWO: Baby, please, don't start crying. You'll ruin your makeup.

WOMAN: Who's crying? I wasn't cry...

AGENT/MAN TWO: So, I've called the director, Frank, and he's on his way over. Trust me. He'll straighten everything out.

WOMAN: I really appreciate that.

AGENT/MAN TWO: No problem. I've got to look out for my interests.

WOMAN: Thank you. It's so comforting to know I have an agent who really cares about his clients.

AGENT/MAN TWO: Yeah, yeah, sure. I'm looking out for you baby - and my performance cut.

WOMAN: Your what?

AGENT/MAN TWO: My performance cut - my box office cut for each show.

WOMAN: You get a cut of every performance?

AGENT/MAN TWO: Yeah, standard agreement. In this business, everyone gets a cut, baby. We just need to make sure the audience doesn't demand their cut.

WOMAN: *(Laughs.)* That's silly. How can they demand a cut?

AGENT/MAN TWO: Easy. It's called a refund.

WOMAN glances nervously at the audience.

WOMAN: Oh, yeah, right.

AGENT/MAN TWO: You hear what I'm saying?

WOMAN: Yes...hey, I thought you were coming tonight.

AGENT/MAN TWO: Uh, yeah, uh, something came up. *(Covers cell phone.)* I'll be right in doll face. Keep them bubbles warm.

WOMAN: Work?

AGENT/MAN TWO: *(Into cell phone.)* Yeah, that's it - work. But don't worry, the director will be there soon.

WOMAN: Okay. Thank you. Bye.

AGENT/MAN TWO: Later.

AGENT/MAN TWO exits, WOMAN pockets cell phone, MAN ONE enters.

WOMAN: Hi.

MAN ONE: Hi.

WOMAN: Any luck?

MAN ONE: No...The stage manager said the director is on his way over.

WOMAN: Yeah, I just heard the same thing from my agent.

MAN ONE: He said I should wait out here for him. So how's it going?

WOMAN: *(Referring to audience.)* I think they're getting a bit restless.

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO enters carrying scripts dressed as director.

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: *(Annoyed.)* There you are. What took you so long?

WOMAN: Actually, we've all been waiting here...

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: *(Referring to audience.)* Oh! Look at them. They are so cute with their doe-like gazes. They have come to experience the magic of theatre; the magic we know how to create. But, sadly, they've fallen prey to a natural disaster. *(To audience.)* Oh, you poor, poor dears. Well don't you worry. I've got everything under control. You just make yourselves comfortable and we'll be right with you. *(To WOMAN and MAN ONE.)* I had a feeling something like this might happen.

WOMAN: You thought I'd break up with my boyfriend and he'd refuse to do the show?

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: Sure. Happens all the time. Anyway, it gives us a chance to fix the script without that pesky playwright hanging around. Here, take these.

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO hands out scripts.

MAN ONE: What's this?

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: It's the play - with all my rewrites.

WOMAN: Can you do that?

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: My dear, it's not a matter of can I do it - I must do it. We are in crisis mode here and I consider it my humanitarian duty to salvage this train wreck.

WOMAN: But, I've already studied the first script, memorized my lines - rehearsed.

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: Yes, yes, it's an unfortunate state of affairs. But frankly, the original script is rubbish.

MAN ONE: What?

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: Total kaka.

WOMAN: What?

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: It stinks. Is that clear enough for you?

WOMAN: I don't understand. I was told it was brilliant.

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: You were told? You were told? Tell me, while you were carefully studying the script and dutifully memorizing your lines, did you bother to actually read it?

WOMAN: Of course...

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: Not. For if you had, you would have realized it is a load of pompous drivel that should never have seen the light of day - and now I'll make sure it never darkens a stage.

MAN ONE: I think it's actually pretty good.

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: Think. Actually. Good.

MAN ONE: Pretty good.

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: Oh, excuse me - pretty good.

MAN ONE: Yeah.

WOMAN: I agree.

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: *(Referring to audience.)* So in your esteemed professional opinions you think these fine people have gone to all the trouble to attend tonight's performance to see "pretty good"? No. No, they want, no - they deserve. No. Still not right. They demand, yes, that's it - they demand more than "pretty good." They demand something new, fresh, exciting, something that will shock them out of their dull everyday lives and make them feel something - anything.

WOMAN: Yes, I agree, that's exactly what I want to give them, but I don't think we have time to learn and rehearse a whole new script.

MAN ONE: I think she might be right.

WOMAN: *(To MAN ONE.)* I *might* be right?

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: Come. Do me a favor. Take a look at your audience - go ahead - look...do they look like the lost tribe of Borneo?

MAN ONE: No?

WOMAN: Of course not.

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: No. They are smart, intelligent, patrons of the theatre; who by the end of the first scene will have figured out how the play ends and be bored stiff for the rest of the show. Trust me, you'll need to arm the ushers with cattle-prods to herd them back into their seats after intermission. *(Beat, to MAN ONE.)* So, you, head back to the green room and quickly rehearse. I'll call you when we are ready to start. In the meantime I'll work with miss fish-face here.

MAN ONE exits.

WOMAN: Did you say fish face?

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: Did I? Sorry, I meant fresh face. Anyway, let's start on page nine - I've simply updated a few things. Other than that, it's pretty much the same.

WOMAN: *(Perusing script.)* Oh, yeah, I see. *(Takes out cell phone.)* So, when I discover Rich's text message to the producer on Steve's cell phone, how do you want me to react?

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: I don't know. Angry? Annoyed? Irritated? Maybe fuming? My god woman, you're an actor. Do I have to spoon feed you every possible emotion for every moment of the play?

WOMAN: No. No, you're right. I'm sorry.

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: I don't think sorry is what we are going for in this scene.

WOMAN: No, I didn't mean I should act sorry, I meant I was sorry...

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: *(Dryly.)* I know. I was joking...So, when you read the text, think about how he has betrayed you - how he has betrayed all of you.

WOMAN opens cell phone and acts as if she is reading a text message.

MAN ONE enters from audience dressed as playwright.

WOMAN: *(As Sandy.)* Oh my god... Oh, my god...OH. MY. GOD!

PLAYWRIGHT/MAN ONE: *(As playwright, to a random member of the audience.)* Excuse me.

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: *(Sotto voce.)* Oh my god.

PLAYWRIGHT/MAN ONE: *(To audience member.)* Can you tell me what is going on here? I just stepped out to go the bathroom and when I came back I thought I was in the wrong theatre.

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: *(To PLAYWRIGHT/MAN ONE.)* James. What a pleasant surprise. Helen, you know James Miller.

PLAYWRIGHT/MAN ONE makes his way to the stage.

WOMAN: Oh, yes, Mr. Miller, it's such an honor to have the playwright attend the performance. It's such a wonderful play...

PLAYWRIGHT/MAN ONE: Yes, thank you, but - Frank? What is going on here?

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: Uh, you mean, what Helen and I were, uh...

PLAYWRIGHT/MAN ONE: Yes, what you and Helen were uh...

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: We were just rehearsing...

PLAYWRIGHT/MAN ONE: Rehearsing? Now?

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: Uh, no. We were just reviewing the scene where Sandy discovers the note from Rich - you know - the one that he sent to the producer on Steve's uh...

WOMAN: Cell phone.

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: Right, uh, to make it look like...

PLAYWRIGHT/MAN ONE: It's supposed to be a telegram.

DIRECTOR/MAN TWO: Yes, well, telegram, text message, it's all kind of the same - isn't it?

PLAYWRIGHT/MAN ONE: No. No, it isn't. This is a 1950s period piece and unless I happened to have missed the part about the time-traveling aliens delivering modern satellite and communication technology to Ozzie and Harriet, I'm pretty darn sure they didn't have cell phones!

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