

The Actor's Nightmare

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I assume that most people who are in theatre, or even have just dabbled in it, have had these "actors' nightmares"—you dream that you have to go onstage, but for some reason you've never attended rehearsal and you don't know a single line.

After writing this play, I've learned that in psychological literature this dream is called "the good student's dream," and the prototype is the high school or college student, in life usually quite conscientious, who dreams that he has to take a test, but that he is totally unprepared: He has forgotten to study, or has lost his book, or he can't read the questions, and so on.

My personal variations have included dreaming I was playing Edmund in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*; and thinking to myself, well, I know the story, I just don't know the lines, maybe I can fake it. Or once dreaming I was acting at Yale Repertory Theatre, but that they had re-designed the backstage area so that I kept getting lost in hallways and couldn't find my way onto the stage. Or once dreaming I was in a musical that I knew nothing about—never rehearsed, never read it—and finding myself onstage needing to sing along with an orchestra, guessing at what the melody was, and ad-libbing lyrics, including some that rhymed. They didn't make sense, but they rhymed.

Recently I had the best actor's nightmare, for me at least. I have acted the role in *The Actor's Nightmare* twice (covering for my friend Jeff Brooks when he went on vacation from the Off-Broadway version); and in the dream I am about to go on in my own play as George Spelvin, but I haven't done it in over ten years, I haven't rehearsed it, and even though I'm the author, I'm not sure if I still know the lines. So I keep wandering about backstage looking for copies of the script—with minutes until I go on—but the stage manager for some reason doesn't have any copies of the play. I keep looking at the stage manager's book—which normally has the play being done—but it just has words and words on it, not my play, and when I read the words, they make no sense, my brain can't compute the meanings of what's on the page.

So it's from a lifetime of dreams like this that I wrote this play. And from hearing and enjoying the theatrical war stories of some friends who were understudies and had to go on with very short notice.

I also wrote the play specifically as a companion piece to *Sister Mary Ignatius*. For that purpose, I made sure the main character was male, that there was a meaty but very different, somewhat glamorous part for the actress who would play Sister Mary; and I also added some positive thoughts about religion, as spoken by the man reminiscing about his days at a monastery school.

ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

The Actor's Nightmare was first presented by Playwrights Horizons in New York City on a double bill with *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You* on October 14, 1981. The production was directed by Jerry Zaks; set design by Karen Schulz; costume design by William Ivey Long; lighting design by Paul Gallo; sound design by Aural Fixation; production stage manager was Esther Cohen. The cast was as follows:

George Spelvin	Jeff Brooks
Meg	Polly Draper
Sarah Siddons	Elizabeth Franz
Ellen Terry	Mary Catherine Wright
Henry Irving	Timothy Landfield

CHARACTERS

GEORGE SPELVIN, an accountant, 20s–30s

MEG, a stage manager, 25–30

SARAH SIDDONS, a grand actress

ELLEN TERRY, another actress, not as grand

HENRY IRVING, a grand actor

(Note: There is also the part of the Executioner, but I prefer that that part not be listed in the program. It is normally double-cast with HenryIrving, but you could have a separate actor do it if you preferred.)

During the subsequent run of *The Actor's Nightmare*, the following actors also joined the production: as George, Christopher Durang, Brian Keeler, John Short; as Meg, Carolyn Mignini, Brenda Currin, Madi Weland; as Sarah, Nancy Marchand, Mary Louise Wilson, Kathleen Chalfant, Lynn Redgrave, Patricia Gage; as Ellen, Deborah Rush, Alice Playten, Cynthia Darlow, Winnie Holzman, Angee Cockcroft; as Henry, Jeffrey Hayenga, Mark Herrier, Kevin O'Rourke. The understudies during the run included Claudette Sutherland, Merle Louise, Helen-Jean Arthur (all three for Sarah) and Mark Arnott, Tracey Ellis, Debra Dean, James Eckhouse, and Ian Blackman.

The final performance off-Broadway was January 29, 1984.

THE ACTOR'S NIGHTMARE

Scene: Basically an empty stage, maybe with a few set pieces on it or around it. George Spelvin, a young man, wanders in. He looks baffled and uncertain where he is. Enter Meg, the stage manager. In jeans and sweatshirt, perhaps, pleasant, efficient.

GEORGE: Oh, I'm sorry. I don't know how I got in here.

MEG: Oh, thank goodness you're here. I've been calling you.

GEORGE: Pardon?

MEG: An awful thing has happened. Eddie's been in a car accident, and you'll have to go on for him.

GEORGE: Good heavens, how awful. Who's Eddie?

MEG: Eddie.

(He looks blank.)

MEG: Edwin. You have to go on for him.

GEORGE: On for him.

MEG: Well, he can't go on. He's been in a car accident.

GEORGE: Yes I understood that part. But what do you mean "go on for him"?

MEG: You play the part. Now I know you haven't had a chance to rehearse it exactly, but presumably you know your lines, and you've certainly seen it enough.

GEORGE: I don't understand. Do I know you?

MEG: George, we really don't have time for this kind of joshing. Half-hour. *(Exits.)*

GEORGE: My name isn't George, it's...well, I don't know what it is, but it isn't George.

(Enter Sarah Siddons, a glamorous actress, perhaps in a sweeping cape.)

SARAH: My God, did you hear about Eddie?

GEORGE: Yes I did.

SARAH: It's just too, too awful. Now good luck tonight, George darling, we're all counting on you. Of course, you're a little too young for the part, and you are shorter than Edwin so we'll cut all the lines about bumping your head on the ceiling. And don't forget when I cough three times, that's your cue to unzip the back of my dress and then I'll slap you. We changed it from last night. *(She starts to exit.)*

GEORGE: Wait, please. What play are we doing exactly?

SARAH: *(Stares at him.)* What?

GEORGE: What is the play, please?

SARAH: Coward.

GEORGE: Pardon?

SARAH: Coward. *(Looks at him as if he's crazy.)* It's the Coward. Noel Coward. *(Suddenly relaxing.)* George, don't do that. For a second, I thought you were serious. Break a leg, darling. *(Exits.)*

GEORGE: *(To himself.)* Coward. I wonder if it's *Private Lives*. At least I've seen that one. I don't remember rehearsing it exactly. And am I an actor? I thought I was an accountant. And why does everyone call me George?

(Enter Dame Ellen Terry, younger than Sarah, a bit less grand.)

ELLEN: Hello, Stanley. I heard about Edwin. Good luck tonight. We're counting on you.

GEORGE: Wait. What play are we doing?

ELLEN: Very funny, Stanley.

GEORGE: No really. I've forgotten.

ELLEN: *Checkmate.*

GEORGE: *Checkmate?*

ELLEN: By Samuel Beckett. You know, in the garbage cans. You always play these jokes, Stanley, just don't do it onstage. Well, good luck tonight. I mean, break a leg. Did you hear? Edwin broke *both* legs. *(Exits.)*

GEORGE: I've never heard of *Checkmate*.

(Re-enter Meg.)

MEG: George, get into costume. We have fifteen minutes. *(Exits.)*

(Enter Henry Irving, age 28-33, also somewhat grand.)

HENRY: Good God, I'm late. Hi, Eddie. Oh you're not Eddie. Who are you?

GEORGE: You've never seen me before?

HENRY: Who the devil are you?

GEORGE: I don't really know. George, I think. Maybe Stanley, but probably George. I think I'm an accountant.

HENRY: Look, no one's allowed backstage before a performance. So you'll have to leave, or I'll be forced to report you to the stage manager.

GEORGE: Oh she knows I'm here already.

HENRY: Oh. Well, if Meg knows you're here it must be all right I suppose. It's not my affair. I'm late enough already. *(Exits.)*

MEG: *(offstage.)* Ten minutes, everybody. The call is ten minutes.

GEORGE: I better just go home. *(Takes off his pants.)* Oh dear, I didn't mean to do that.

(Enter Meg.)

MEG: George, stop that. Go into the dressing room to change. Really, you keep this up and we'll bring you up on charges.

GEORGE: But where is the dressing room?

MEG: George, you're not amusing. It's that way. And give me those.

(Takes his pants.) I'll go soak them for you.

GEORGE: Please don't soak them.

MEG: Don't tell me my job. Now go get changed. The call is five minutes. *(Pushes him off to dressing room; crosses back the other way, calling out:)* Five minutes, everyone. Five minutes. Places.

(A curtain closes on the stage. Darkness. Lights come up on the curtain. A voice is heard.)

VOICE: Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention please? At this evening's performance, the role of Elyot, normally played by Edwin Booth, will be played by George Spelvin.

(Sound of audience moans.)

VOICE: The role of Amanda, normally played by Sarah Bernhardt, will be played by Sarah Siddons. The role of Kitty the bar maid will be played by Mrs. Patrick Campbell. Dr. Crippin will play himself. The management wishes to remind the audience that the taking of photographs is strictly forbidden by law, and is dangerous as it may disorient the actor. Thank you.

(The curtain opens. There is very little set, but probably a small set piece to indicate the railing of a terrace balcony. Some other set piece [a chair, a table, a cocktail bar] might be used to indicate wealth, elegance, French Riviera.

Sarah Siddons is present when the curtain opens. She is in a glam-

orous evening gown, and is holding a cocktail glass and standing behind the terrace railing, staring out above the audience's head. There is the recorded sound of applause.

After a moment George arrives onstage, fairly pushed on. He is dressed as Hamlet—black leotard and large gold medallion around his neck. As soon as he enters, several flash photos are taken, which disorient him greatly. When he can, he looks out and sees the audience and is very taken aback. We hear music.)

SARAH: Extraordinary how potent cheap music is.

GEORGE: What?

SARAH: Extraordinary how potent cheap music is.

GEORGE: Yes, that's true. Am I supposed to be Hamlet?

SARAH: *(Alarmed; then going on:)* Whose yacht do you think that is?

GEORGE: Where?

SARAH: The duke of Westminster, I expect. It always is.

GEORGE: Ah, well, perhaps. To be or not to be. I don't know any more of it.

(She looks irritated at him; then she coughs three times. He remembers and unzips her dress; she slaps him.)

SARAH: Elyot, please. We are on our honeymoons.

GEORGE: Are we?

SARAH: Yes. *(Irritated, being over-explicit.)* Me with Victor, and you with Sibyl.

GEORGE: Ah.

SARAH: Tell me about Sibyl.

GEORGE: I've never met her.

SARAH: Ah, Elyot, you're so amusing. You're married to Sibyl. Tell me about her.

GEORGE: Nothing much to tell really. She's sort of nondescript, I'd say.

SARAH: I bet you were going to say that she's just like Lady Bundle, and that she has several chins, and one blue eye and one brown eye, and a third eye in the center of her forehead. Weren't you?

GEORGE: Yes. I think so.

SARAH: Victor's like that too. *(Long pause.)* I bet you were just about to tell me that you traveled around the world.

GEORGE: Yes I was. I traveled around the world.

SARAH: How was it?

GEORGE: The world?

SARAH: Yes.

GEORGE: Oh, very nice.

SARAH: I always feared the Taj Mahal would look like a biscuit box. Did it?

GEORGE: Not really.

SARAH: *(She's going to give him the cue again.)* I always feared the Taj Mahal would look like a biscuit box. Did it?

GEORGE: I guess it did.

SARAH: *(Again.)* I always feared the Taj Mahal would look like a biscuit box. Did it?

GEORGE: Hard to say. What brand biscuit box?

SARAH: I always feared the Taj Mahal would look like a biscuit box. Did it? *(Pause.)* Did it? Did it?

GEORGE: I wonder whose yacht that is out there.

SARAH: Did it? Did it? Did it? Did it?

(Enter Meg. She's put on an apron and maid's hat and carries a duster, but is otherwise still in her stage manager's garb.)

MEG: My, this balcony looks dusty. I think I'll just clean it up a little.

(Dusts and goes to George and whispers in his ear; exits.)

GEORGE: Not only did the Taj Mahal look like a biscuit box, but women should be struck regularly like gongs. *(Applause.)*

SARAH: Extraordinary how potent cheap music is.

GEORGE: Yes. Quite extraordinary.

SARAH: How was China?

GEORGE: China?

SARAH: You traveled around the world. How was China?

GEORGE: I liked it, but I felt homesick.

SARAH: *(Again this is happening; gives him cue again.)* How was China?

GEORGE: Lots of rice. The women bind their feet.

SARAH: How was China?

GEORGE: I hated it. I missed...Sibyl.

SARAH: How was China?

GEORGE: I...miss the maid. Oh, maid!

SARAH: *How was China?*

GEORGE: Just wait a moment please. Oh, maid!

(Enter Meg.)

GEORGE: Ah, there you are. I think you missed a spot here.

(She crosses, dusts, and whispers in his ear; exits.)

SARAH: How was China?

GEORGE: *(With authority.)* Very large, China.

SARAH: And Japan?

GEORGE: *(Doesn't know, but makes a guess.)* Very...small, Japan.

SARAH: And Ireland?

GEORGE: Very...green.

SARAH: And Iceland?

GEORGE: Very white.

SARAH: And Italy?

GEORGE: Very...Neapolitan.

SARAH: And Copenhagen?

GEORGE: Very...cosmopolitan.

SARAH: And Florida?

GEORGE: Very...condominium.

SARAH: And Perth Amboy?

GEORGE: Very...mobile home, I don't know.

SARAH: And Sibyl?

GEORGE: What?

SARAH: Do you love Sibyl?

GEORGE: Who's Sibyl?

SARAH: Your new wife, who you married after you and I got our divorce.

GEORGE: Oh were we married? Oh yes, I forgot that part.

SARAH: Elyot, you're so amusing. You make me laugh all the time.

(Laughs.) So, do you love Sibyl?

GEORGE: Probably. I married her.

(Pause. She coughs three times, he unzips her dress, she slaps him.)

SARAH: Oh, Elyot, darling, I'm sorry. We were mad to have left each other. Kiss me.

(They kiss. Enter Dame Ellen Terry as Sibyl, in an evening gown.)

ELLEN: Oh, how ghastly.

SARAH: Oh dear. And this must be Sibyl.

ELLEN: Oh how ghastly. What shall we do?

SARAH: We must all speak in very low voices and attempt to be civilized.

ELLEN: Is this Amanda? Oh, Elyot, I think she's simply obnoxious.

SARAH: How very rude.

ELLEN: Oh, Elyot, how can you treat me like this?

GEORGE: Hello, Sibyl.

ELLEN: Well, since you ask, I'm very upset. I was inside writing a letter to your mother and wanted to know how to spell apothecary.

SARAH: A-P-O-T-H-E-C-A-R-Y.

ELLEN: *(Icy.)* Thank you.

(Writes it down; Sarah looks over her shoulder.)

SARAH: Don't scribble, Sibyl.

ELLEN: Did my eyes deceive me, or were you kissing my husband a moment ago?

SARAH: We must all speak in very low voices and attempt to be civilized.

ELLEN: I was speaking in a low voice.

SARAH: Yes, but I could still hear you.

ELLEN: Oh. Sorry. (Speaks too low to be heard.)

SARAH: (Speaks inaudibly also.)

ELLEN: (Speaks inaudibly.)

SARAH: (Speaks inaudibly.)

ELLEN: (Speaks inaudibly.)

SARAH: I can't hear a bloody word she's saying. The woman's a nincompoop. Say something, Elyot.

GEORGE: I couldn't hear her either.

ELLEN: Elyot, you have to choose between us immediately—do you love this creature, or do you love me?

GEORGE: I wonder where the maid is.

ELLEN AND SARAH: (Together, furious.) Forget about the maid, Elyot! (They look embarrassed.)

ELLEN: (Trying to cover.) You could never have a lasting relationship with a maid. Choose between the two of us.

GEORGE: I choose...oh God, I don't know my lines. I don't know how I got here. I wish I weren't here. I wish I had joined the monastery like I almost did right after high school. I almost joined, but then I didn't.

SARAH: (Trying to cover.) Oh, Elyot, your malaria is acting up again and you're ranting. Come, come, who do you choose, me or that baggage over there.

ELLEN: You're the baggage, not I. Yes, Elyot, who do you choose?

GEORGE: I choose... (To Sarah.) I'm sorry, what is your name?

SARAH: Amanda.

GEORGE: I choose Amanda. I think that's what he does in the play.

ELLEN: Very well. I can accept defeat gracefully. I don't think I'll send this letter to your mother. She has a loud voice and an overbearing manner and I don't like her taste in tea china. I hope, Elyot, that when you find me hanging from the hotel lobby chandelier with my eyes all bulged out and my tongue hanging out, that you'll be very, very sorry. Good-bye. (Exits.)

SARAH: What a dreadful sport she is.

GEORGE: (Doing his best to say something his character might.) Poor Sibyl. She's going to hang herself.

SARAH: Some women should be hung regularly like tapestries. Oh who cares? Whose yacht do you think that is?

GEORGE: (Remembering.) The Duke of Westminster, I exp...

SARAH: (Furious.) How dare you mention that time in Mozambique? (Slaps him.) Oh, darling, I'm sorry. (Moving her cigarette grandly.) I love you madly!

GEORGE: (Gasps.) I've inhaled your cigarette ash. (He coughs three times. Sarah looks confused, then unzips the front of his Hamlet doublet. He looks confused, then slaps her. She slaps him back with a vengeance. They both look confused.)

SARAH: There, we're not angry anymore, are we? Oh, Elyot, wait for me here and I'll pack my things and we'll run away together before Victor gets back. Oh, darling, isn't it extraordinary how potent cheap music can be?

(She exits; recorded applause on her exit. George sort of follows a bit, but then turns back to face the audience. Flash photos are taken again; George blinks and is disoriented. Lights change, the sound of trumpets is heard, and Henry Irving, dressed in Shakespearean garb, enters and bows grandly to George.)

HENRY: Hail to your Lordship!

GEORGE: Oh hello. Are you Victor?

HENRY: The same, my Lord, and your poor servant ever.

GEORGE: This doesn't sound like Noel Coward.

HENRY: A truant disposition, good my Lord.

GEORGE: You're not Victor, are you?

HENRY: My Lord, I came to see your father's funeral.

GEORGE: Oh yes? And how was it?

HENRY: Indeed, my Lord, it followed hard upon.

GEORGE: Hard upon? Yes, I see.

(Enter Meg.)

GEORGE: Oh, good, the maid.

(She whispers to him.)

GEORGE: Thrift, thrift, Horatio. The funeral baked meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables. What does that mean?

(Meg exits.)

GEORGE: Ah, she's gone already.

HENRY: My Lord, I think I saw him yesternight.

GEORGE: Did you? Who?

HENRY: My Lord, the king your father.

GEORGE: The king my father?

HENRY: Season your admiration for a while with an attent ear till I may deliver upon the witness of these gentlemen this marvel to you.

GEORGE: I see. I'm Hamlet now, right?

HENRY: *Sssh! (Rattling this off in a very Shakespearean way:)*

Two nights together had these gentlemen,
Marcellus and Bernardo, on their watch
In the dead waste and middle of the night
Been thus encountered. A figure like your father,
Arméd at point exactly, cap-a-pe,
Appears before them and with solemn march
Goes slow and stately by them. Thrice he walked
By their oppressed and fear-surprised eyes
Within his truncheon's length, whilst they, distilled
Almost to jelly with the act of fear,
Stand dumb and speak not to him. This to me
In dreadful secrecy impart they did,
And I with them the third night kept the watch,
Where, as they had delivered, both in time,
Form of the thing, each word made true and good,
The apparition comes. I knew your father.
These hands are not more like.

GEORGE: Oh, my turn? Most strange and wondrous tale you tell,
Horatio. It doth turn my ear into a very...*(At a loss.)* merry...bare
bodkin.

HENRY: As I do live, my honored lord, tis true,
and we did think it writ down in our duty
To let you know of it.

GEORGE: Well, thank you very much. *(Pause.)*

HENRY: Oh yes, my Lord. He wore his beaver up.

GEORGE: His beaver up. He wore his beaver up. And does he usually
wear it down?

HENRY: A countenance more in sorrow than in anger.

GEORGE: Well I am sorry to hear that. My father was a king of much
renown. A favorite amongst all in London town. *(Pause.)* And in
Denmark.

HENRY: I war'nt it will.

GEORGE: I war'nt it will also.

HENRY: Our duty to your honor. *(Exits.)*

GEORGE: Where are you going? Don't go.

(Smiles out at audience. Enter Sarah dressed as Queen Gertrude.)

GEORGE: Oh, Amanda, good to see you. Whose yacht do you think that
is?

SARAH: O Hamlet, speak no more.

Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul,
And there I see such black and grainéd spots
As will not leave their tinct.

GEORGE: I haven't seen Victor. Someone was here who I thought might
have been him, but it wasn't.

SARAH: Oh speak to me no more.

These words like daggers enter in mine ears.
No more, sweet Hamlet.

GEORGE: Very well. What do you want to talk about?

SARAH: No more! *(Exits.)*

GEORGE: Oh don't go. *(Pause; smiles uncomfortably at the audience.)*

Maybe someone else will come out in a minute. *(Pause.)* Of course
sometimes people have soliloquies in Shakespeare. Let's just wait a
moment more and maybe someone will come.

*(The lights suddenly change to a dim blue background and one bright
white spot center stage. George is not standing in the spot.)*

Oh dear. *(He moves somewhat awkwardly into the spot, decides to
do his best to live up to the requirements of the moment.)* To be or not
to be, that is the question. *(Doesn't know any more.)* Oh maid! *(No
response; remembers that actors call for "line.")* Line. Line! Ohhhh.
Oh, what a rogue and peasant slave am I. Whether tis nobler in the
mind's eye to kill oneself, or not killing oneself, to sleep a great deal.
We are such stuff as dreams are made on; and our lives are rounded
by a little sleep.

*(The lights change. The spot goes out, and another one comes up stage
right. George moves into it.)*

Uh, thrift, thrift, Horatio. Neither a borrower nor a lender be.
But to thine own self be true. There is a special providence in the
fall of a sparrow. Extraordinary how potent cheap music can be.
Out, out, damn spot! I come to wive it wealthily in Padua; if wealth-
ily, then happily in Padua. *(Sings.)* Brush up your Shakespeare; start
quoting him now; Da da...

(Lights change again. That spot goes off; another one comes on, center stage, though closer to audience. George moves into that.)

I wonder whose yacht that is. How was China? Very large, China. How was Japan? Very small, Japan. I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all. Line! Line! Oh my God. *(Gets idea.)* O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended thee, and I detest all my sins because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell. But most of all because they offend thee, my God, who art all good and deserving of all my love. And I resolve to confess my sins, to do penance, and to amend my life, Amen.

(Friendly.) That's the act of contrition that Catholic school children say in confession in order to be forgiven their sins. Catholic adults say it too, I imagine. I don't know any Catholic adults. Line!

(Explaining.) When you call for a line, the stage manager normally gives you your next line, to refresh your memory. Line! The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain upon the place below, when we have shuffled off this mortal coil. Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him well. Get thee to a nunnery. Line.

Nunnery. As a child, I was taught by nuns, and then in high school I was taught by Benedictine priests. I really rather liked the nuns, they were sort of warm, though they were fairly crazy too. Line. I liked the priests also. The school was on the grounds of the monastery, and my junior and senior years I spent a few weekends joining in the daily routine of the monastery—prayers, then breakfast, then prayers, then lunch, then prayers, then dinner, then prayers, then sleep. I found the predictability quite attractive. And the food was good. I was going to join the monastery after high school, but they said I was too young and should wait. And then I just stopped believing in all those things, so I never did join the monastery. I became an accountant. I've studied logarithms, and cosine and tangent...

(Irritated.) LINE!

(Apologetic.) I'm sorry. This is supposed to be *Hamlet* or *Private Lives* or something, and I keep rattling on like a maniac. I really do apologize. I just don't recall attending a single rehearsal. I can't imagine what I was doing. And also you came expecting to see Edwin Booth and you get me. I really am very embarrassed. Sorry. *Line!*

I have always depended on the kindness of strangers. *Stella!* It is a far, far better thing I do than I have ever done before. It's a far, far better place I go to than I have ever been before. *(Sings the alphabet song.)* a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l, m, n, o, p, q, r, s, t . . .

(As he starts to sing, enter Ellen Terry, dragging two large garbage cans. She puts them side by side, gets in one.)

GEORGE: Oh, good. Are you Ophelia? Get thee to a nunnery.

(She points to the other garbage can, indicating he should get in it.)

GEORGE: Get in? Okay. *(He does.)* This must be one of those modern *Hamlets*.

(Lights change abruptly to stark "Beckett lighting.")

ELLEN: Nothing to be done. Pause. Pause. Wrinkle nose. *(Wrinkles nose.)* Nothing to be done.

GEORGE: I guess you're not Ophelia.

ELLEN: We'll just wait. Pause. Either he'll come, pause pause pause, or he won't.

GEORGE: That's a reasonable attitude. Are we, on a guess, waiting for Godot?

ELLEN: No, Willie. He came already and was an awful bore. Yesterday he came. Garlic on his breath, telling a lot of unpleasant jokes about Jews and Polacks and stewardesses. He was just dreadful, pause, rolls her eyes upward. *(She rolls her eyes.)*

GEORGE: Well, I am sorry to hear that. Pause. So who are we waiting for?

ELLEN: We're waiting for Lefty.

GEORGE: Ah. And is he a political organizer or something, I seem to recall?

ELLEN: Yes, dear, he is a political organizer. He's always coming around saying get involved, get off your behinds and organize, fight the system, do this, do that, uh, he's exhausting, he's worse than Jane Fonda. And he has garlic breath just like Godot, I don't know which of them is worse, and I hope neither of them ever comes here again. Blinks left eye, blinks right eye, closes eyes, opens them. *(Does this.)*

GEORGE: So we're really not waiting for anyone, are we?

ELLEN: No, dear, we're not. It's just another happy day, pause, smile, pause, picks nit from head. *(Picks nit from head.)*

GEORGE: Do you smell something?

ELLEN: That's not your line. Willie doesn't have that many lines. *(Louder.)* Oh, Willie, how talkative you are this morning!

GEORGE: There seems to be some sort of muck at the bottom of this garbage can.

ELLEN: Mustn't complain, Willie. There's muck at the bottom of everyone's garbage can. Count your blessings, Willie. I do. (*Counts to herself, eyes closed.*) One. Two. Three. Are you counting, Willie?

GEORGE: I guess so.

ELLEN: I'm up to three. Three is my eyesight. (*Opens her eyes.*) Oh my God, I've gone blind. I can't see, Willie. Oh my God. Oh what a terrible day. Oh dear. Oh my. (*Suddenly very cheerful again.*) Oh well. Not so bad really. I only used my eyes occasionally. When I wanted to see something. But no more!

GEORGE: I really don't know this play at all.

ELLEN: Count your blessings, Willie. Let me hear you count them.

GEORGE: Alright. One. Two. Three. That's my eyesight. Four. That's my hearing. Five, that's my...Master Charge. Six, that's...

ELLEN: Did you say God, Willie?

GEORGE: No.

ELLEN: Why did you leave the monastery, Willie? Was it the same reason I left the opera?

GEORGE: I have no idea.

ELLEN: I left the opera because I couldn't sing. They were mad to have hired me. Certifiable. And they were certified shortly afterward, the entire staff. They reside now at the Rigoletto Home for the Mentally Incapacitated. In Turin. Pause. Tries to touch her nose with her tongue. (*Does this.*)

VOICE: Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention please?

ELLEN: Oh, Willie, listen. A voice. Perhaps there is a God.

VOICE: At this evening's performance, the role of Sir Thomas More, the man for all seasons, normally played by Edwin Booth, will be played by George Spelvin. The role of Lady Alice, normally played by Sarah Bernhardt, will be played by Sarah Siddons. The role of Lady Margaret, normally played by Eleanora Duse, will be read by the stage manager. And at this evening's performance the executioner will play himself.

GEORGE: What did he say?

ELLEN: The executioner will play himself.

GEORGE: What does he mean, the executioner will play himself?
(*Lights change to Man for All Seasons general lighting. Enter Sarah as Lady Alice [Sir Thomas More's wife], and Meg with a few costumed*

touches but otherwise in her stage manger's garb and carrying a script as Lady Margaret [Sir Thomas More's daughter]. Note: Though Meg starts by referring to her script, quite quickly it becomes clear that she knows the lines and does her best to play Sir Thomas' daughter with appropriate passion and seriousness.)

MEG: Oh father, why have they locked you up in this dreadful dungeon, it's more than I can bear.

SARAH: I've brought you a custard, Thomas.

MEG: Mother's brought you a custard, father.

GEORGE: Yes, thank you.

MEG: Oh father, if you don't give in to King Henry, they're going to cut your head off.

SARAH: Aren't you going to eat the custard I brought you, Thomas?

GEORGE: I'm not hungry, thank you.
(*Sudden alarming crash of cymbals, or something similarly startling musically occurs. The Executioner appears upstage. He is dressed as the traditional headsman—the black mask, bare chest and arms, the large ax. The more legitimately alarming he looks the better. He can be played by the same actor who plays Henry Irving if his build and demeanor are appropriate. If not, it is possible to have a different actor play this role.*)

GEORGE: Oh my God, I've got to get out of here.

MEG: He's over here. And he'll never give in to the King.

GEORGE: No, no, I might. Quick, is this all about Anne Boleyn and everything?

MEG: Yes, and you won't give in because you believe in the Catholic Church and the infallibility of the Pope and the everlasting life of the soul.

GEORGE: I don't necessarily believe in any of that. (*To Executioner.*) Oh, sir, there's been an error. I think it's fine if the King marries Anne Boleyn. I just want to wake up.

MEG: Oh don't deny God, father, just to spare our feelings. Mother and I are willing to have you dead if it's a question of principle.

SARAH: The first batch of custard didn't come out all that well, Thomas. This is the second batch. But it has a piece of hair in it, I think.

GEORGE: Oh shut up about your custard, would you? I don't think the Pope is infallible at all. I think he's a normal man with normal capabilities who wears gold slippers. I thought about joining the monastery when I was younger, but I didn't do it.

ELLEN: (*Waking up from a brief doze.*) Oh I was having such a pleasant

dream, Willie. Go ahead, let him cut your head off, it'll be a nice change of pace.

(The Executioner, who has been motionless, now moves. In a sudden gesture, he reveals the cutting block that waits for George's head. Note: In the Playwrights Horizons production, our set designer constructed a square furniture piece that doubled as a settee and/or small cocktail table during the Private Lives section. However, when the Executioner kicked the top of it, the piece fell open, revealing itself to contain a bloodied cutting block.)

GEORGE: That blade looks very real to me. I want to wake up now. Or change plays. I wonder whose yacht that is out there.

(Sarah offers him the custard again.)

GEORGE: *No, thank you!* A horse, a horse! My kingdom for a horse!

EXECUTIONER: Sir Thomas More, you have been found guilty of the charge of High Treason. The sentence of the court is that you be taken to the Tower of London, thence to the place of execution, and there your head shall be stricken from your body, and may God have mercy on your soul.

(Meg helps George out of the garbage can.)

GEORGE: All this talk about God. All right, I'm sorry I didn't go to the monastery, maybe I should have, and I'm sorry I giggled during Mass in third grade, but I see no reason to be killed for it.

ELLEN: Nothing to be done. That's what I find so wonderful.

(Meg puts George's head on the block.)

GEORGE: No!

EXECUTIONER: Do I understand you right? You wish to reverse your previous stand on King Henry's marriage to Anne and to deny the Bishop of Rome?

GEORGE: Yes, yes, God, yes. I could care less. Let him marry eight wives.

EXECUTIONER: That's a terrible legacy of cowardice for Sir Thomas More to leave behind.

GEORGE: I don't care.

EXECUTIONER: I'm going to ignore what you've said and cut your head off anyway, and then we'll all pretend you went to your death nobly. The Church needs its saints, and school children have got to have heroes to look up to, don't you all agree?

ELLEN: I agree. I know I need someone to look up to. Pause smile picks her nose. *(Does this.)*

GEORGE: Yes, yes, I can feel myself waking up now. The covers have

fallen off the bed, and I'm cold, and I'm going to *wake up so that I* can reach down and pull them up again.

EXECUTIONER: Sir Thomas, prepare to meet your death.

GEORGE: Be quiet. I am about to wake up.

EXECUTIONER: Sir Thomas, prepare to meet your death.

GEORGE: I'm awake!

(Looks around him. Sarah offers him custard again.)

GEORGE: No, I'm not.

SARAH: He doesn't know his lines.

EXECUTIONER: Sir Thomas, prepare to meet your death.

GEORGE: Line! Line!

MEG: You turn to the executioner and say, "Friend, be not afraid of your office. You send me to God."

GEORGE: I don't like that line. Give me another.

MEG: That's the line in the script, George. Say it.

GEORGE: I don't want to.

MEG: Say it.

ELLEN: Say it, Willie. It'll mean a lot to me and to generations of school children to come.

SARAH: O Hamlet, speak the speech, I pray you, trippingly on the tongue.

EXECUTIONER: Say it!

GEORGE: Friend, be not afraid of your office. You send me... Extraordinary how potent cheap music is.

MEG: That's not the line.

GEORGE: Women should be struck regularly like gongs.

MEG: George, say the line right.

GEORGE: They say you can never dream your own death, so I expect I'll wake up just as soon as he starts to bring the blade down. So perhaps I should get it over with.

MEG: Say the proper line, George.

(George kneels down.)

GEORGE: Friend, be not afraid of your office.

(Executioner raises his ax.)

ELLEN: Good-bye, Willie.

SARAH: Good-bye, Hamlet.

MEG: Good-bye, George.

EXECUTIONER: Good-bye, Sir Thomas.

GEORGE: You send me to God. (*Executioner raises the ax to bring it down. Blackout. Sound of the ax coming down.*)

EXECUTIONER: (*In darkness.*) Behold the head of Sir Thomas More.

ELLEN: (*In darkness.*) Oh I wish I weren't blind and could see that, Willie.

Oh well, no matter. It's still been another happy day. Pause, smile, wrinkles nose, pause, picks nit from head, pause, pause, wiggles ears, all in darkness, utterly useless, no one can see her. She stares ahead. Count two. End of play.

(*Music plays. Maybe canned applause. Lights come up for curtain calls. The four take their bows [if Henry Irving does not play the executioner, he comes out for his bow as well]. Sarah and Ellen have fairly elaborate bows, perhaps receiving flowers from the executioner. They gesture for George to take his bow, but he seems to be dead. They look disorientated and then bow again, and lights out. End.*)

TO THE ACTOR

Normally this play is a lot of fun to do; and it seems to be my most popular play in high schools.

Auditioning actors to play George Spelvin, I was surprised to see that it was kind of a hard part in some ways...or maybe I should put it another way: It didn't seem to be open to too many interpretations.

George says he's an accountant, and I think we should accept that. Some people get hung up by the thought that the play is George's "dream", and that it clearly shows he has more than average knowledge of theatre (Noel Coward, Beckett, Shakespeare), and so that maybe he really is an actor, but he's just dreaming he's an accountant.

Yes, yes, yes...that's all possible, but it seems way too complicated. The play works better if George is a true innocent who has wandered into this situation and who knows almost nothing of what's going on around him. (Indeed if he were actually an actor, he would probably make a better stab at the Noel Coward style than he does.)

So let George be an accountant...and I'm the author of the play, not George.

Another trap is to get stuck in playing George's fear. I have found that professional actors sometimes like to bring their own feelings about stage fright into the play, but it doesn't really fit with the comedy. During the ad-lib mono-

logue in particular, if George starts going to too much angst, it becomes boring for us to watch.

Rather I think the part of George gives the actor a real opportunity for audience rapport and lightness. Once George gets over his initial shock at this crazy dream-like situation, he becomes involved with a "game"—he is trying to guess what might be the right thing to say next.

Along those lines, when he makes a good guess, I think it's perfectly acceptable that he smiles and nods at the audience, as if to say to them, "I'm actually doing okay now, aren't I?" Or when the Shakespeare starts and he hears a line like "He wore his beaver up," his total bafflement on how possibly to guess what this line means is also worthy of a look to the audience.

I have found if an actor focuses instead on George being fearful, that that makes the actor afraid to "bond" with the audience. And that's where a lot of the comedy and the fun lie.

Also, Jerry Zaks, who directed this play and *Sister Mary* (and several others of my plays), is always telling actors the wonderful advice that they should make "positive" choices. So if George is stuck in this fairly no-win situation, rather than choosing "fear" or a depressed "I can't win" attitude, there's a lot more energy and comedy in choosing the positive: Maybe I'll guess the next line right; well, even if it was wrong, it was a good try, wasn't it? And in the context of this dream play, George can kind of get into the "game" aspect of it all...the game is to guess the possibly right next line; and his attitude is also "game," he's willing to try all this.

If George has been sufficiently willing throughout the play (even through the Beckett, about which he has no idea: he's seen sophisticated comedy and Shakespeare, it seems, but not this absurdist tragedy), then when the executioner comes on, an actual fear can then be appropriate to play...something feels more threatening to George in this section. If he hasn't been playing strong fear up until then, it's a better switch.

Ellen's lines in the Beckett have normally gone well, but it's important that all her "pause, pause, wrinkle nose" sorts of lines are done with commitment as if they are appropriate lines. (The idea is that she is saying her stage directions aloud...though it's not meant to be that she's making a mistake, it's meant to be that that's how this play is done in this dream.)

Well, that's all.