Rick Mitchell

Simple Pleasures: the Ten-Minute Play, Overnight Theatre, and the Decline of the Art of Storytelling

The ten-minute play is burgeoning in the United States, yet it is a phenomenon which has received virtually no critical attention. Here, a contributing playwright places the ten-minute play – and its cousin, the 'overnight' play – within an historical and theoretical context in order to examine the aesthetic and political implications of the genre. Rick Mitchell's discussion thus ranges between the history of the one-act play, Walter Benjamin's essay on storytelling, Bertolt Brecht's notions of 'complex' (as opposed to 'simple') pleasures and epic acting, Filippo Marinetti's writings on the variety theatre, and Chekhov's ideas about the strengths of the short, nonsensical, vaudeville farce. Rick Mitchell also relates his own recent experience in creating a ten-minute comedy, *Acadiana Sludge* – written, rehearsed, and performed (off-book) in less than twenty-four hours – and the text of this play augments the article. Rick Mitchell's other plays include *Brecht in L.A.*, *Ventriloquist Sex*, *Urban Renewal*, *Potlatch*, and *The Composition of Herman Melville*, recently published by Intellect Books. He is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at California State University, Northridge, where he directs the Northridge Playwrights Workshop, and he has published numerous articles about performance, theory, and playwriting.

Miniatures, ivory carvings, elaborated to the point of greatest perfection, stones that are perfect in polish and engraving, lacquer work or paintings in which a series of thin, transparent layers are placed one on top of the other – all these products of sustained, sacrificing effort are vanishing, and the time is past in which time did not matter. Modern man no longer works at what cannot be abbreviated.

(Paul Valéry, quoted in Benjamin, p. 92–3).

I don't think the traditional form of theatre means anything any longer. Its significance is purely historic. (Brecht, p. 66)

IN the United States, in the sheer volume of new plays produced annually – both professionally and on the amateur stage – the ten-minute play may be about to eclipse the full-length play, if it hasn't done so already. The ten-minute phenomenon was initially sparked by the introduction of the form in 1977 by Actors Theatre of Louisville (ATL), and was then spurred on by numerous ten-minute play competitions, including ATL's National Ten-Minute Play Contest. The phenomenon burgeoned during the 'nineties and continues to grow.

Although the ten-minute play may provide new opportunities – programmes of these plays enable playwrights to gain exposure and experience, more actors and directors can be involved in evenings of ten-minute plays – the form seems to resist complexity, which may be part of its appeal. Michael Bigelow Dixon, former literary manager of ATL, suggests that the short form is so popular because we've become overburdened with lengthy narratives: 'since our society is experiencing a glut of stories, the ten-minute play cuts through the exposition and gets right to the conflict and change' (quoted in Garrison, p. 43). In other words, today's stories – on TV, on our stages, in film, and in everyday life – are both too numerous and overwritten. Much better, Dixon suggests, to 'cut to the bone' (to borrow a phrase from David Mamet) and get right to the story's (and drama's) essence, in ten minutes or less.

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While Dixon's chop-it-down approach to playwriting may make sense for plays (or dramatists) that are able to say no more in two hours than they can say in ten minutes (which brings to mind the formulaic single-hero-pursuing-a-single-goal Hollywood film whose one-sentence explanation on the video cover actually captures the entire movie), it is Dixon's premise – that the world's stories are today over-wrought and over-developed – which remains most troubling. In the mass media, which since the First World War have increasingly dominated experience, we find the world's conflicts already reduced to corporate-friendly mini-narratives, biased sound and image bites stripped of historical context. Typical Hollywood fare is similarly superficial.

Thus, Dixon's claim that today's stories are too numerous seems off the mark, since the forms in which these stories appear often lack depth. Perhaps the American ten-minute play, rather than making stories clearer and sharper, distorts them through over-simplification, not unlike the media. Indeed, this shortened dramatic form may be emblematic of our increasing inability to tell or listen to stories.

Walter Benjamin, in his essay 'The Storyteller', suggests that the art of storytelling – rooted in oral tradition – begins to disappear around the time of the First World War, and that the atrophy of this once widely practised art 'has not halted since' (p. 84). 'Was it not noticeable,' Benjamin asks, 'at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield gone silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?' (p. 84). In addition to the mind-numbing horrors wrought by modern warfare, Benjamin blames the middle-class press for our waning ability to weave intricate stories. Particularly problematic is 'information', whose

> prime requirement is that it appear understandable in itself. It is indispensable for information to sound plausible. Because of this it proves incompatible with storytelling. If the art of storytelling has become rare, the dissemination of information has had a decisive share in the state of affairs. (Benjamin, p. 89)

Today, with our unprecedented access to endless cable channels, twenty-four-hour running news, and Internet sex, Benjamin's observation that information co-opts individual experience remains highly relevant. Despite the inanity of radio and TV news, more people are tuning in than ever before to consume 'plausible' information stripped of complexity and nuance. Stories disseminated by the media are increasingly formulaic, brief, and derivative, while productions of new, full-length plays – already ignored by most of the American public – are being supplanted by bills of ten-minute dramas (or less: a fellow playwright recently informed me that she was working on a new piece for an evening of five-minute plays).

The vacuity of today's all-pervasive information continues to abet the decline of storytelling in all media, although the ten-minute play, while symptomatic of the information age, may also, ironically, possess a potential to resist the sort of 'plausible' information that has been so detrimental to our ability to communicate.

The Relevance of Stand-Up

I first heard of the ten-minute play a decade ago. I've written over a dozen (primarily full-length) plays since then, but I eschewed writing a ten-minute piece until recently, when I accepted an invitation to participate in Fast & Loose, a recurring programme of 'overnight' plays at Sacred Fools Theater in Hollywood, California.[1]

Just about every American playwright seems to be writing ten-minute plays these days, from Mamet to August Wilson, and Fast & Loose provided an unusual opportunity to write my own ten-minute piece, which I'd have to begin and complete between dinner and breakfast. Although the form has some drawbacks, my recent experience has been quite positive, and I've been thinking about the implications of both the ten-minute play and overnight theatre ever since. Perhaps ten-minute plays are so popular because twenty-first-century audiences prefer to receive (and give) information and entertainment (which have become interchangeable) in small doses, although effective short plays, especially those embracing

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comedy, can also just be fun to watch, not necessarily something to scoff at. As the 'mature' Bertolt Brecht observes in 'A Short Organum for the Theatre,' written in 1948, shortly after he completed a six-year exile in Los Angeles:

> From the first it has been the theatre's business to entertain people, as it also has of all the other arts. It is this business which always gives it its particular dignity; it needs no other passport but fun, but this it has got to have. (p. 180)

The most compact theatre of fun is that of the joke, which according to Freud requires only a teller, a spectator, and a third, often absent subject: the victim of the joke. As Eric Bentley points out, from the perspectives of both Freud and Henri Bergson, the nineteenth-century philosopher of the comic, 'to make jokes is to create a theatre' (p. 231). Although as a playwright I usually include humour in my plays, my main experience in the theatre of jokes was as a comedian/ventriloquist, the profession by which I earned my living throughout the 'eighties and much of the 'nineties. My job required me to make people laugh, often, during my thirty to forty-five minutes on stage, and I had to do everything in my power – through ad-libs, audience participation, revising on the fly – to make sure that the audience had fun.

Too many nights of little spectator fun, always measurable by the audience's laughter, would result in the end of my comedy career, which spanned about fifteen years. As a comedian I had become accustomed to writing new material hours or even minutes before trying it out on stage, and I often 'wrote' on my feet, in the midst of performance. Unfortunately, the instant gratification of having an audience respond to one's writing so soon after it's written has rarely been available to me as a dramatist – but participation in overnight theatre could enable my dramatic writing to receive feedback, in performance, hours after I completed it.

While working as a stand-up (with puppets) I plied my trade in what had once been called the variety theatre, where one act would follow another with no narrative-connecting thread, nor – for the most part – the bits and jokes within each comedian's routine. Variety theatre also features a popular, presentational format in which the actors rarely try to conceal the fact that they're performers. Although American audiences once flocked to variety shows, such as vaudeville, wild west shows, and burlesque, the variety format long ago fell into disfavour. In some ways, however, an evening of ten-minute plays is similar to variety theatre, since there is rarely any type of narrative thread or voice to hold the programme together.[2]

Against the Literary Theatre

Variety theatre, one of the many 'low' forms being utilized by artists who emerged at the turn of the century, has an anti-literary bent, yet it has influenced goundbreaking plays by Brecht, Beckett, and many other playwrights. And variety theatre provided the historical avant-garde with a model for aggressively anti-realist performance. In the Futurist manifesto issued in 1913, Filippo Marinetti calls for new, radical performances that build upon the multi-act, non-narrative, presentational aspects of the variety show, whose rapid succession of unrelated acts seemed an appropriate form for modern times. The Italian Futurist opens his manifesto, 'The Variety Theatre,' with a swift jab at theatrical convention, especially elements of realism:

> We are deeply disgusted with the contemporary theatre (verse, prose, and musical) because it vacillates stupidly between historical reconstruction (pastiche or plagiarism) and photographic reproduction of our daily life; a finicking, slow, analytic, and diluted theatre worthy, all in all, of the age of the oil lamp. (p. 179)

Marinetti goes on to say that variety theatre generates 'the futurist marvellous', some of whose elements include:

> (a) powerful caricatures; (b) abysses of the ridiculous; (c) delicious, impalpable ironies; . . . (i) the whole gamut of laughter and smiles, to flex the nerves; (j) the whole gamut of stupidity, imbecility, doltishness, and absurdity, insensibly pushing the intelligence to the very border of madness; . . . (l) a cumulus of events unfolded at

great speed, of stage characters pushed from right to left in two minutes. . . . (p. 180)

Like other modernists of his time Marinetti embraces carnivalesque aspects of popular culture – 'the Variety Theatre is naturally anti-academic, primitive, and naive' (p. 182) – in an attempt to undermine bourgeois conventions.

Although the Futurist would probably be displeased with overnight plays that are neatly and rationally constructed – since 'one must completely destroy all logic in Variety Theatre' (p. 183) – Marinetti's variety-influenced aesthetic could make room for one grotesquely comic short work after another, written and mounted within a few hours, and performed to the audience (Marinetti might choose to stage several works simultaneously), since such a programme could fulfil Futurist longings for speed, illogical structure, and destruction of the (then) accepted tenets of 'art'. Additionally, anti-realistic elements of a radical variety theatre could help open up signification – through, for example, strange juxtapositions, by providing gaps which the active spectator is encouraged to fill in – rather than attempting to foreclose signification, as the conventional realism of theatre so often does.[3]

Many of today's proponents of super-short drama, however, view the ten-minute play not as a genre possessing subversive potential, but as a condensed version of the one-act play, which has a long history in the West beginning with comic dialogues and solo mimes in ancient Greece, and continuing with medieval tropes – small liturgical enactments – in the Church and comic interludes, to the curtain-raisers and afterpieces popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to vaudeville sketches and the short works of 'art theatre' companies such as the Provincetown Players and the Abbey Theatre – and today's ten-minute plays.

Some dramatists associated with Expressionism (and we can include 'early' Brecht here) created powerful works in the one-act form just prior to, during, and immediately after the First World War, and short melodramatic or comedic one-acts were featured in variety shows. Eugene O'Neill's *In the Zone*, for example, earned the dramatist significant royalty payments from its numerous appearances on the vaudeville stage.[4]

Although there have been notable exceptions to the dearth of important one-act plays since the First World War – some of the work of Beckett, Albee, and Pinter and, more recently, of American playwrights such as Mac Wellman and Len Jenkin – Broadway and the major regional theatres (with a few exceptions, such as ATL's Humana Festival) rarely feature one-acters today.

Beginning with the post-First World War mass-media explosion, radio writers began churning out new material for comedy sketches and dramas at an unprecedented rate in order to feed the public's insatiable appetite for mass entertainment that was both 'fun' and easily digestible. Increasingly distant from its oral, storytelling roots, the live popular performance that fed early mass media was rendered 'safe' through homogenization, a process which occurred not only with the transferrence of performance to radio, film, and TV, but also within live performance itself.

Simple and Complex Pleasures

Following the Second World War, various variety forms, especially comedy, found their way onto television, where writers eventually transformed the comedy sketch into today's formulaic American sitcom, a comedy fully developed within twenty-two minutes, with eight minutes of commercial interruptions.

The majority of the huge audiences that purchased tickets for vaudeville shows and a movie (which was originally just one of the acts on a vaudeville bill),[5] as well as the millions who've tuned in to radio and TV, have felt as if they were receiving a fair amount of pleasure for their investment. As Brecht had emphasized, however, 'There are weaker (simple) and stronger (complex) pleasures which the theatre can create. The last named . . . are what we are dealing with in great drama' (p. 181). Suggesting that the development of the latter requires a reasonable

amount of time and intricacy, Brecht states that great dramas 'attain their climaxes rather as cohabitation does through love: they are more intricate, richer in communication, more contradictory and more provocative of results' (p. 181). As his own plays forcefully suggest, Brecht favours pleasures that are complex.

Producers of ten-minute plays, on the other hand, often prefer works that seem understandable in themselves, an aspect of information which remains inimical to the art of storytelling. Gregg Henry, Artistic Director of Kennedy Center's American College Theatre Festival (KC/ACTF) and the producer of an annual ten-minute play contest, summarizes the ten-minute form's structure: 'Bang, lay out the facts, crash, get the complications in there and work to resolve the problem, thwack, end. The whole thing should be this complete, tight theatre experience' (quoted in Garrison, p. 53–4).

While this sort of playwriting seems to preclude the complex pleasures of great drama, such an approach may be necessary because, within ten minutes or less, producers and spectators expect the play to be 'complete'. Additionally, the actors usually have only a few hours to work together, set blocking, learn lines, and develop characters, whether the play's rehearsed for one day (in its overnight version) or for a few hours over several days. Judith Royer, who's immersed in ten-minute plays as Regional Chair of the New Plays Program of KC/ACTF, discusses the dilemma faced by theatre artists working in the ten-minute form:

> For the writer, there is no time to develop much character; subtlety and complexity is hard to pull off in ten minutes but is so needed. And when it is written with subtlety and complexity, I don't know that directors and actors can pull it off because there's usually never much time to rehearse them. (Quoted in Garrison, p. 57)

Cutting to the Chase

Actress Lili Taylor, after participating in a fund-raising event that featured overnight plays, echoes Royer's suggestions that one must avoid psychological exploration and get right to the point: 'You have to cut to the chase. . . . You can't mess around with delving into moments. You have to make some quick decisions and go with it' (Getlen, p. 23).

Like Henry's recommended straight-ahead, bang-crash-thwack dramatic structure, Royer and Taylor's advice implies that the ten-minute play must – out of necessity – embrace the obverse of subtlety, and emphasize the sort of 'plausible' information that is inimical to telling stories in an inherently complex world. Brecht, seemingly in agreement with his friend Benjamin, believes that clearly delineated, linear stories suggest an apathetic attitude towards society: 'When something seems "the most obvious thing in the world" it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up' (p. 71).

Unlike Royer and Taylor, however, Brecht never suggests that a theatre which excludes psychological exploration of character is necessarily limiting. On the contrary, he believes that western theatre artists overemphasize the importance of the individual at the expense of historical understanding, which is why Brecht attempted to banish from his epic theatre (or at least severely curtail) empathy, an often taken-for-granted element of theatrical realism. Now in variety theatre, psychological depth and empathy are rarely important: in fact, empathy can destroy the possibility of laughter. As Bergson points out, a prerequisite of comedy is lack of emotional identification between the spectator and the character at whom the spectator laughs. During a comic performance empathy must be excluded, or at least minimized, since 'laughter has no greater foe than emotion' (Bergson, p. 329).

According to Brecht, emotion prohibits the spectator from thinking. Thus, Brecht prefers epic actors to avoid seeming to inhabit and become dramatic characters. If the actor merely demonstrates the character, the spectator – not getting caught up in emotional concerns for a character's situation – will be more likely to think about the repercussions and implications of the dramatic action, both within the theatre and outside in the world.

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In 'The Street Scene', an oft-cited introduction to epic acting and the V-effekt, Brecht speaks of the demonstrator who merely indicates what a particular individual involved in a car accident was like; never does the demonstrator try to mount a tour-de-force performance in which he seems to become the character. Brecht's demonstrator does not let the audience forget, even for a moment, that he's a demonstrator and not a character. Similarly, Bergson's ideal comic actors, as well as most variety performers, never efface their own personae in order to create believable, empathetic, 'fully developed' characters. Since the presentational aspects of comedy, variety, and epic theatre (which are by no means exclusive) discourage actors and spectators from pretending that characters or situations are 'real,' these non-realistic performance forms may be useful models for artists working within short-form drama that limits the development of empathy and character complexity.

Seeking Inspiration Overnight

I would like to turn now to my own recent experience in overnight theatre in order to shed more light on practical aspects of overnight, ten-minute play-making within the context of its theoretical implications, and vice versa.

On a Thursday night at 8.00 p.m., seven playwrights, myself among them, met at Sacred Fools Theater to choose words and numbers from a styrofoam hat. The night that I participated, each of the dramatists chose a noun, an oxymoron, and a year, as well as the genders of each of our three actors, and then we had to write, overnight, a ten-minute play – ten pages maximum – that incorporated our selections. My play was to utilize two actors and one actress and incorporate 'diamond necklace' (noun); 'open secret' (oxymoron); and '1981' (year).

After suggesting that overnight theatre's spectators responded best to comedy, the producer, Gerald McClanahan, reminded us that we were to hand in our plays, complete or not, by 10.00 a.m. at the absolute latest the following morning. Each director would then randomly pick out of a hat one playwright's and three actors' names (of the appropriate genders) and begin rehearsing. The actors and directors would return to theatre at 4.30 for tech, and at 8.00 that evening the plays would go up, with lines (more or less) memorized, actors in costume, and sound and lighting cues in place.

I had the idea that after receiving my topics, I'd hang out in marginal areas of Hollywood for a while, seeking interesting dialogue for the play. First stop: a twenty-four-hour diner in a poorly-lit strip mall. The diner was virtually empty, so I walked across the parking lot, towards a small Indian restaurant where I observed through the glass front wall a heavy-set man, with unusual tattoos on his arms, talking on a cellphone. Across from him sat another large man – like his friend, thirty-something – and I imagined that they were both involved in some sort of urgent transaction. In a corner, two middle-aged men were waiting for their meals at one of the restaurant's nine or ten tables. I chose a table right between both groups, although the younger men departed shortly after I sat down.

Once I set my writing pad and pencils on the table, the conversation of the remaining couple, who were perhaps suspicious of surveillance, more or less ceased. But I had already ordered my $5.99 meal, so I was stuck. I tried to jot down some ideas. 1981: Reagan, reaganomics, cocaine, comedy clubs, a comic, an agent. I wrote some Pinteresque dialogue with the diamond necklace in mind (but not in the dialogue), but it didn't really go anywhere.

My watch's minute hand seemed to be advancing more rapidly than usual as I waited, and waited, for my meal. Obviously, no one else was coming into this place, and my neighbours, whenever they spoke now, were practically whispering, so I considered just walking out. But my table was right in front of the open kitchen. I jotted down some more phrases, places, people's names. Nothing. After about twenty minutes a heaping plate of curried vegetables arrived, accompanied by a big bowl of rice. Normally, I'd be pleased with such large portions but I knew

I'd need every minute to write. So I kept the pad and pencils out, hoping to get inspired.

By the time I cleared my plate it was close to 9.45 and I had barely written anything. Still hungry for dialogue and a (short) story, I swung by a doughnut shop known for its flamboyant, street-person clientele. A few people were milling about on the dark sidewalk outside the shop, but the shop itself was empty. I only had about twelve hours to begin and complete a play so I decided to head home, where I could work within familiar confines.

At my desk I took out my pads and pencils, looked over my ideas, and eventually started writing. I completed a page or so of dialogue that took place at a stag party at an Elks Lodge; dialogue between a comedian and an agent (based on one of the many shady agents I had worked for during my days as a stand-up); some lines of dialogue between two comedians: a Mac Wellman-esque interlude full of strange language. I skimmed through a few books, reading sections in works by Elias Cannetti and Michael Taussig about 'secrets' and 'public secrets' in hopes that one of these author's ideas might provide a key to incorporating that 'open secret' oxymoron into the play.

I also tried Wellman's trick of randomly picking words from the dictionary and inserting them into dialogue. I read a few paragraphs from Artaud's *The Theatre and Its Double*, pulled out books by Foucault and Brecht. Ten hours until the script was due. Nine hours, eight. Although I usually work quickly, often finishing a draft of a full-length play within a few months, I had never attempted to write an entire play within a few hours.

With the opening of a new play looming, I've stayed up most of the night before a rehearsal writing a necessary new scene, but I'd already been living with the play and the characters for a while, and I knew what I had to write in order to make the piece work. Now, however, at one in the morning, I was sitting at my desk with my eighth cup of coffee, feeling completely lost. What if I didn't write anything? What if there wasn't time to complete enough drafts? Doubt began to set in. I thumbed through some fiction I had written and eventually, out of desperation, I thought about adapting a scene from one of my plays. This seemed to be 'cheating' but I had to turn something in.

The Theme Emerges

Reluctant to borrow lines from an earlier play, I searched my computer's hard drive for ideas and came across some old notes for a full-length play I had wanted to develop. The piece would be based on a young, former neighbour from Lafayette, Louisiana, the centre of a Cajun- and Creole-dominated region, Acadiana, where I had lived for two years in the late 'nineties.

Shortly before I departed for Los Angeles, the neighbour – a childhood beauty-pageant contestant – had moved with her husband and four children to a trailer in Breaux Bridge, home of the annual crawfish festival. Their mobile home, which had once housed oil-company workers, sat alone in a large field where several oil rigs had been sited. The children weren't allowed outside because they might fall into one of the abandoned oil wells. I sensed potential here, but time was running short, so I decided to push aside my pencils and type directly into the computer.

I quickly wrote a scene between the play's wife, Crystal, and her husband, Darrell, who had just returned to Louisiana from New York City, where he had been trying to make it as a Cajun banjo player (although I had never heard of a Cajun band using a banjo). All three of the play's characters would be Cajun, and I would try to utilize an incident from my former neighbour's family – her husband's father and brother's arrest and imprisonment for stealing roofing materials and cattle from an adjoining farm – as well as her hopeful expectations that her husband would take title to his father's land and, like a nearby resident, forever put an end to the family's financial woes by striking oil, enabling them to live in a large house and purchase a 'dualie', a large, four-door, luxury pick-up truck which features a set of dual wheels on the rear axle.

Not long after I had written a page of dialogue, though, it seemed as if this play – like the others I had begun within the past few hours – wasn't progressing. I frantically scanned over the other plays I had started that night, my (limited) notes, fragments of my fiction. What was I thinking about when I accepted this assignment? In order to pull the project off I'd have to make the play plot-heavy, but I never write that way. At about 3.30 a.m., ready to throw up my arms, my wife, Caroline, walked downstairs.

'I've got nothing, nothing,' I complained. 'And I have to deliver a play in a few hours.'

She was a too sleepy to be alarmed.

'What do you have?'

I told her about the various plays I had begun and eventually read her the page of Louisiana dialogue, which she found promising. Caroline knew the model for the play's central character quite well, having had numerous 'visits' with her during our stay in Lafayette, and we discussed events from our neighbour's life that I could possibly incorporate into the play. Our necessarily brief discussion and my wife's encouragement enabled me to get back on track. I jotted down some ideas that might help me to form some sort of story, wrote more dialogue, thought about where the story might go, wrote on.

Usually, I write numerous scenes before a narrative begins to emerge. But with the play due in a few hours I didn't have time to write until I had so much material that I could carve pieces away, adding here and there, until a story developed. As I wrote dialogue, I went back and thought about the story's arc, wrote, thought about the overall structure. And the piece began to take shape.

The noun that I selected from the hat, 'diamond necklace', became a desired and contested object; the oxymoron, 'open secret', described Crystal's affair with one of her husband's brothers, Trey; and the play was to be set during my selected year, '1981', which gave me the idea of including references to the Donahue TV show. I also wanted to incorporate what has become a horrific problem in many parts of Louisiana, the illegal dumping of toxic waste produced by the state's numerous oil-processing and plastics plants. While living in Lafayette, I had actually heard of companies and truck drivers covering up small ponds and holes in the yards of unsuspecting homeowners with highly toxic 'free fill'. The free sludge often led to strikingly high rates of cancer and birth defects, and it would usually take years before anyone began to figure out the environmental cause. Although there would not be time to develop fully the toxic waste angle, the holes in the field surrounding the trailer provided an opportunity to include an off-stage truck driver from Toxi-Chem Plastics, the 'sludge man,' who would every so often visit the property to fill in the holes.

Rehearsing the Play

The sun had been up for some time when I printed out the first draft of the play. I poured another cup of coffee and began revising with a pencil, but at around 7.00 my body suddenly became immune to caffeine and I started nodding out on top of the script. Since I didn't have time to sleep, I hopped in the shower, woke myself up, and went right back to work. I printed out and revised a couple of more drafts, and by 9.15 I had what I thought was a workable script, which I quickly read and revised one more time. Some printer problems ensued and I ended up arriving at the theatre at about 10.25.

Amazingly, I felt confident about the piece, whose title became *Acadiana Sludge* during one of the last two drafts. I also felt guilty about delivering the play nearly half an hour late to people I didn't really know, but as soon as I entered the small theatre, where about thirty people – actors, directors, writers – took up almost half of the seats, I was unexpectedly struck by the room's vibrant, early-morning energy. The artists were joking around, laughing, yet – well aware of the full day of rehearsing, learning lines, an evening performance ahead – they were also intensely focused.

I've seen great backstage anticipation just before a conventionally rehearsed play opens, but these actors seemed less worn down,

more excited. In less than ten hours after receiving a just-written script, they'd be performing, off-book, in front of an audience, and the actors seemed energized by the immediacy and challenge of the process.

Seconds after I handed my cast and director copies of the play, they sat down in the theatre and read their scripts silently. The director, Aaron Francis, quickly decided who would play which part, and then – like the other six casts – my group found a space to read through the piece aloud. We ended up on a cracked curb under a tree, where the actors worked through the script again and again. As the readings continued, the play made more sense – to the actors, to me.

I listened carefully, made some minor changes, omitting, adding, or altering a word here and there, and I answered a few simple questions. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to offer much guidance on the Cajun accent, which ended up sounding more cartoonish than Cajun. This was comedy, though, so realistic accents and psychological depth weren't overly important, although more accurate accents would have made the characters less stereotypical in performance.

After an hour or so of reading through the script aloud, the actors had a forty-five minute rehearsal slot on the stage. Francis focused on exits and entrances, as well as on the parts of the script that required the most attention to blocking, but he didn't have enough stage time to run through the entire play. Afterwards, I gave a couple of quick notes out in the parking lot and then headed home. The actors drove over to the director's home to continue rehearsing.

I returned to the theatre that night, about ten minutes before the opening of the latest instalment of Fast & Loose to find that *Acadiana Sludge* would be the fourth play performed, and the final piece before intermission. Of the seven plays that opened and closed that evening (on Saturday night the theatre company would present eight new overnight plays), the two that seemed to work best were comedies, which confirmed my suspicions, as well as the producer's observation, that audiences for overnight plays respond most strongly to comedy.

Although a couple of the evening's playwrights wrote realistic pieces, the impulse of realism to efface process in order to create the illusion of 'real' life is problematic because the manic process of creating the plays in such a short time remains at the forefront of the spectators' consciousness. Fast & Loose's publicity and the producer's opening remarks, for example, emphasized that all the performances were created in less than twenty-four hours, and the programme – whose cover boasts 'Brand New Plays Written Last Night, and Rehearsed and Premiered Today!' – informs the audience of each play's pre-selected oxymoron, year, and noun.

Empathy – with Actors, not Characters

Thus, the spectators – judging how well the dramatist incorporates into the play the pre-selected words, and carefully watching for inevitable moments of imperfection, such as dropped lines – never forget that they're seeing a play. Empathizing with the actors' difficult task of memorizing and performing a new play within a few hours, the audience often responds with sympathetic laughter when the actors improvise. Indeed, the audience's awareness of the intense process of creating the plays is a primary component of the evening's appeal.

While ten-minute play-making has all the limitations already discussed, it does restore a sense of theatrical play to an American theatre which still remains wedded to realism and – in the eyes of many dramatists – an over-long development process averse to spontaneity. Overnight theatre's foregrounding of process might also encourage companies and dramatists to develop texts that push beyond the limits of realistic conventions.

Admittedly, a dramatist writing mainly ten-minute plays would become accustomed to making easy dramatic choices and thus hinder his or her ability to create longer, more complex works. Yet there are precedents of dramatists benefiting from apprenticeships writing brief, non-realistic one-act plays. Chekhov began his theatre career with numerous short comedies or vaudevilles, which were loosely based on the French

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vaudeville farce, and one can find the influence of Chekhov's short works, especially their comedy, in his later, full-length plays.

Theatre scholars, however, rarely find much merit in Chekhov's one-acters, or in vaudeville comedies in general, although the playwright himself believed that the short, comic form was worth exploring. He wrote in a letter to his friend A. S. Souvorin: 'I like the "vaudeville". . . . In one-act things you must write nonsense – there lies their strength' (p. 25). Such 'nonsense' could be an antidote to the sort of realism engendered by Stanislavsky, who made his reputation by directing Chekhov's great plays. To the end, however, Chekhov remained displeased with Stanislavsky's work because, rather than directing the plays in a way that was consistent with theatre's inherent, irrepressible artifice (perhaps a sort of 'nonsense'), Stanislavsky attempted to efface it. In an essay on Chekhov's art, Meyerhold, the great constructivist director and the original Treplev in Stanislavsky's production of *The Seagull*, discusses an exchange between Chekhov – bewildered by the sounds of frogs, bugs, and dogs that Stanislavsky had inserted into the production – and an actor.

> 'Why all this?' asked Chekhov, in a dissatisfied voice.
>
> 'It's real,' answered the actor.
>
> 'It's real,' repeated Chekhov laughing, and after a pause said: 'The stage is art. Kramskoy has a genre painting with wonderfully painted faces. How would it be if the nose were cut out from one of the faces and a real nose inserted? The nose will be "real" but the painting is spoiled.' (p. 319)

Although theatre, unlike painting, features the human body as its primary medium, it is still an aesthetic construct whose elements can never be completely 'real'. Chekhov believes that since artifice – especially apparent in short nonsensical comedies – is inherent in all theatre, it remains futile to attempt to suppress it with a naturalistic *mise-en-scène*. While relevant to all theatre-making, Chekhov's advice to the Stanislavskian actor seems particularly relevant to ten-minute, overnight play-making, since the spectators of the overnight play – constantly reminded of the development process while watching one unrelated ten-minute play after another – will never mistake what happens on stage for reality.

A Unique Performativity

Some painstaking artists might deplore the short preparation time available in overnight theatre, as well as the required quickness of decisions – of dramatists, of actors who suddenly can't recall blocking or their next line – but this sort of immediacy helps to make overnight theatre uniquely performative, an unrepeatable event similar to what Elinor Fuchs calls 'performance theatre', which

> bears some similarity to the conventional theatre of dramatic texts in situating the theatrical event in an imaginative world evoked by visual, lighting, and sound effects, and an ensemble of actors. Yet it is like performance art in two signal regards: in its continuous awareness of itself as performance, and in its unavailability for re-presentation . . . the text seems not to be reimaginable even where it is presumably restageable. (p. 79–80)

In general, the overnight play, unlike what Fuchs calls 'performance theatre', relies less on the uniqueness of a particular, 'experimental' ensemble (say the Wooster Group) or dramatist/director (such as Richard Foreman) for its un-repeatability, yet its creation and performance within twenty-four hours precludes an overnight play from re-presentation at a later date.

The overnight theatre event's inability to be reproduced – while perhaps frustrating for those artists who seek a longer run, more development time, or greater complexity – may be one of its more important aspects, especially since mass reproduction remains responsible for the hegemony of the mass media and information. As the performance theorist Peggy Phelan suggests, 'Performance's independence from mass reproduction, technologically, economically, and linguistically, is its greatest strength' (p. 149). The ten-minute play's innate resistance to various types of reproduction – electronic, mass, or 'live' – seems to help it avoid reification. Paradoxically, the phenomenon of ten-minute

theatre may be an example of the commodification of experience, and of our increasing ineptness in the complex art of storytelling.

While there's cause to remain critical of American theatre's growing infatuation with ten-minute plays, the overnight versions of these plays – with their emphases on process and spontaneity – might help to regenerate theatre artists and audiences, if only for a day or an evening. Perhaps it's worth following the playwriting advice of Chekhov, which seems to embrace aspects of the overnight, comedic, ten-minute play that many of us might be all too willing to dismiss:

> Don't be afraid to show yourself foolish; we must have freedom of thinking, and only he is an emancipated thinker who is not afraid to write foolish things. Don't round things out, don't polish. But be awkward and impudent. Brevity is the sister of talent. (p. 23)

'Nonsense' and lack of polish draw attention to process, to the playfulness of theatre that is so often repressed in realistic drama. And the emancipated thinker's foolishness – even when confined to the simple pleasures of the farcical ten-minute play – could possibly suggest, like Chekhov's plays, that people and the world are not so easily reduced to plausible, understandable-in-itself information, the nemesis of storytelling.

Overall, I was pleased with the performance of my comedic, nonsensical play – which generated laughter throughout – and I felt that some of the other plays on the bill were relatively successful, although a couple of the weaker plays (which favoured realism) tempered my enthusiasm for the full programme. There have been a few brief, largely descriptive articles about ten-minute theatre, but there is little documentation of the overnight play because it is so ephemeral, never existing beyond the twenty-four hour period of its creation/performance. For an example of what a comic overnight play can look like, at least in its written form, I append to this article the unaltered version of my brief and at times foolish comedy *Acadiana Sludge*, which was effectively performed on Friday night, 17 May 2002, less than twelve hours after I typed the play's final words.

Notes

1. Since 1998, Sacred Fools Theater have presented several evenings of their ongoing series of new, overnight theatre, Fast & Loose (www.SacredFools.org). Overnight plays – which have been presented throughout the U.S. – are ten-minute works written and performed, off-book, within twenty-four hours. Usually, six to twelve of these plays, each by a different writer, are presented in a single evening. Tina Fallon claims to have produced the first overnight play – she calls them twenty-four hour plays – in New York in 1995. Subsequently, Fallon formed 'The 24 Hour Plays' company through which she is attempting to license the twenty-four hour play event to others. See www.24hourplays.com for further information regarding Fallon's company.

2. As John Limon points out, even vaudeville itself 'was a kind of Taylorization and bourgeoisification of variety, formulated by its founder, B. F. Keith, with Boston rectitude in mind. Among proscribed phrases on the Keith circuit were "son of a gun" and "holly gee"; words that referred to the body in a slangy way – for example, "slob" – were forbidden' (p. 40).

3. As Elin Diamond suggests, 'Brechtian hindsight' has enabled us to realize that 'conventional realism, more than any other form, mystifies the process of theatrical signification. Because it naturalizes the relation between character and actor, setting and world, realism operates in concert with ideology. And because it depends and insists on a stability of reference, an objective world that is the source and guarantor of knowledge, realism surreptitiously reinforces (even if it argues with) the arrangements of the world. Realism's fetishistic attachment to the true referent and the spectator's invitation to rapturous identification with a fictional imago serve the ideological function of mystifying the means of material production, thereby concealing historical contradictions, while reaffirming or mirroring the "truth" of the status quo' (p. 366).

4. Several of O'Neill's early one-acts suggested the emergence of a new, innovative voice in American drama, although the playwright considered *In the Zone* (in spite of its initial, positive critical reception on the 'legitimate' stage in 1917) to be hackneyed and formulaic: 'It is too facile in its conventional technique, too full of clever theatrical tricks' (O'Neill, quoted in Floyd, p. 113).

5. Tom Gunning emphasizes that vaudeville was early cinema's 'primary place of exhibition until around 1905. Film appeared as one attraction on the vaudeville stage, surrounded by a mass of unrelated acts in a non-narrative and even nearly illogical succession of performances' (p. 66–88).

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Rick Mitchell

Acadiana Sludge

Acadiana Sludge was first produced by Sacred Fools Theater Company, Hollywood, California, as part of Fast & Loose, an ongoing series of overnight plays. The producer was Gerald McClanahan, and the play was directed by Aaron Francis. The cast was as follows:

Darrell Robert Machemer
Crystal Tara Platt
Trey/Drag Queen Yuri Lowenthal

Characters

DARRELL: *twenties-thirties, Cajun, husband of Crystal.*
CRYSTAL: *twenties-thirties, Cajun, wife of Darrell*
TREY: *twenties-thirties, Cajun, brother of Darrell*
DRAG QUEEN: *Trey in disguise*

Setting

A trailer, Breaux Bridge, Louisiana, 1981.

Zydeco and/or Cajun music may be heard during the play, especially at the beginning and at the end. Throughout, characters cough, particularly Crystal.

Crystal is coughing.
DARRELL You can't keep the kids cooped up all day here in the trailer, Crystal.
CRYSTAL I don't need you to be tellin' me my business, alright.
DARRELL I'll tell you whatever the hell I want. (*Crystal coughs.*)
DARRELL Cover your mouth, will ya.
CRYSTAL Don't think you can just waltz through the door after bein' in New York for six months and just start bossin' everybody around.
DARRELL I'm concerned about the kids.
CRYSTAL Don't go tellin' me what to do with my kids.
DARRELL They're my kids, too. . . . Well, most of 'em.
CRYSTAL Maybe.
DARRELL And they gotta get outside once in a while.
CRYSTAL That's why I sent 'em up to Mama's for the weekend.
DARRELL I mean, Kylin keeps runnin' full speed across the living room, slammin' into walls, like she's Evyl Knevil. Kyle's crawlin' around like a dog, pantin', barkin', bitin' everyone that comes through the damn door.
CRYSTAL Oh, he's just playin.
DARRELL Look at these teeth marks . . . he even broke the skin.
CRYSTAL (*laughs*) Kyle's just goin' through a . . . a stage right now.
DARRELL He's in fifth grade, for Christ's sake.
CRYSTAL I let 'em outside, he's liable to fall into one a them big holes.
DARRELL What holes?
CRYSTAL From when they used to have oil wells here.
DARRELL Oil wells?

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CRYSTAL That's why they put the trailer up here. For the workers.
DARRELL I didn't see any holes.
CRYSTAL That's 'cause the grass is so high. I let the kids go out there now . . . next thing you know, one of 'em's fallin' into an empty oil well, a hundred feet deep.
DARRELL Damn, woman, how many holes you got out there?
CRYSTAL Less than we started with. 'Cause somebody's been nice enough to start fillin' 'em in for me.
DARRELL Who?
CRYSTAL Oh, this nice old man from . . . from Toxi-Chem Plastics. Since last Friday, he's already come by here three times with a dumptruck full a' sludge.
DARRELL What do you gotta pay him?
CRYSTAL He does it for free. (*She coughs*.)
DARRELL How long you had that cold? (*Darrell coughs now and throughout rest of scene*.)
CRYSTAL Since Friday night. All the kids started coughin', too.
DARRELL I don't why you had to move outa Cajun Village.
CRYSTAL 'Cause you stopped sendin' money.
DARRELL I didn't have any.
CRYSTAL Then where the hell you think we're gonna live? In a big plantation home in Breaux Bridge? I mean, I'm feedin' and takin' care of five kids all by myself, waitressin' in the Sonic parkin' lot in them damn roller skates. . . . While you're off in New York tryin' to make it as a Cajun banjo player. For over half a year. And what do you got to show for it?
DARRELL Well, I got on TV.
CRYSTAL On Donahue.
DARRELL What's wrong with that?
CRYSTAL You weren't even playin' the banjo.
DARRELL But I got exposure.
CRYSTAL On a show about men who date cross-dressers.
DARRELL I . . . I just did that to beef up my résumé.
CRYSTAL Well, it didn't get you any gigs, did it?
DARRELL It got me a couple of dates. (*Darrell laughs*.)
CRYSTAL I wouldn't be surprised.
DARRELL I'm jokin' wit' you.
CRYSTAL Maybe I should just take the kids and move back to Mama's. (*It starts to rain*.)
DARRELL You know I'm only kiddin', cher (*pronounced Shay*).
CRYSTAL Maybe you could go live somewhere else.
DARRELL Now why would I wanna do that? And this trailer ain't too bad for a 1965 now, is it?
CRYSTAL (*notices rain*) Rainin' again. Damn. Been rainin' out every damn day this week.
DARRELL Well, at least the water's gonna make everything rise. We'll be able to scoop up some crawfish.
CRYSTAL You can scoop up the crawfish.
DARRELL Hey, the roof's leakin'.
CRYSTAL I know.
DARRELL So you're just gonna stand there?
CRYSTAL It's leakin' in the laundry room. All you gotta do is open up the top of the washin' machine, and the water, it drips right in.
DARRELL Now it's leakin' on top a' the sofa, the TV.
CRYSTAL First time it's done that.
DARRELL We can't stay in this place.
CRYSTAL It ain't like you got the money for us to be stayin' somewhere else.
DARRELL I . . . I got some things I'm workin' on, cher.
CRYSTAL Yeah, right.
DARRELL I do. And it looks good. That's one a the reasons I cut my stay short in New York, even though I was gettin' offers. 'Cause I got this opportunity, yeah. (*Darrell hugs Crystal*.) And I had to come back to make sure my baby's okay. . . .
CRYSTAL What opportunity?
DARRELL C'mon, let's get in the ve-hi-cle before we drowned in here. We'll talk about it on the way to the Gumbo Shop.
CRYSTAL All your 'opportunities' never seem to amount to anything.
DARRELL I got this one all covered, cher. I just hope it don't take too long.
CRYSTAL So you're just gonna make the kids keep waitin'?
DARRELL No, no. . . . Not at all. We can get us some cash right away if you want.
CRYSTAL With what, your looks?
DARRELL You see . . . I had this big gig, in the Poconos, openin' up for this Elvis impersonator. . . . The Cajun Elvis, from right down here in Lafayette. . . . I mean, that's how I got the gig, they had the Cajun Elvis, so what could be a better opening act than the Cajun banjo player. . . . It was on Cajun Night. . . . Right before Mardi Gras. And after the gig, well, you know how it is on the road. . . . We got into a little poker game, with me, Elvis, and a few of the musicians. . . . And, well, the trombone player, he owed me a few dollars . . . a lotta dollars . . . and, well . . . he paid me with this – (*Darrell pulls out a diamond necklace*.)
CRYSTAL Wow.
DARRELL Pure diamonds, baby.
CRYSTAL It's beautiful.
DARRELL Let's go get some gumbo, yeah.
CRYSTAL Can I wear it?
DARRELL Maybe we should just go cash it in.
CRYSTAL But it's so . . . wonderful. And you know I've always wanted a diamond necklace.

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DARRELL I thought maybe I'd put it in my safe deposit box.
CRYSTAL Oh, baby. Let me wear it. (*She hugs and kisses him*.) Please.
DARRELL Now don't get too attached to it.
CRYSTAL There ain't nothin' funny about this, I hope.
DARRELL You don't see me lookin' over my shoulder, do you?
CRYSTAL Not yet.
DARRELL Not ever. I mean, a man looks over his shoulder at every piece a' straight road ain't been livin' a straight life. And if there's one thing I am, baby, it's straight.
CRYSTAL Put it on for me.
DARRELL Just for tonight, okay? (*He puts necklace on her*.)
CRYSTAL I . . . I feel like the Queen of the Mardi Gras ball.
DARRELL Pretty soon, you gonna be drivin' around town in a new dualie.
CRYSTAL What, are you robbin' a bank?
DARRELL My father's signin' the property over to me and my brother.
CRYSTAL That ranch has been mortgaged ten times over.
DARRELL But someone from the oil company was out there last week. And looks like they're gonna be drillin' for oil.
CRYSTAL It doesn't mean they're gonna get anything.
DARRELL You kiddin' me? Boudreaux, right next door, let the oil company put a pump in his yard last year, and it's been runnin' non-stop. He's makin' close to five thousand a week. For doin' absolutely nothin'. (*Knock at the door*.)
DARRELL Who the hell can that be?
CRYSTAL Maybe it's that nice little old man from Toxi-Chem Plastic. (*Crystal opens door*.) Well, how you doin' there, Trey?
TREY Darrell here? I seen his ve-hi-cle out in the road.
DARRELL Hey, what's up, buddy?
TREY How long you been in town?
DARRELL Couple a' hours.
TREY Didn't expect to find you here.
DARRELL Daddy said he needed me right away so he could sign over the papers to the ranch.
TREY Too bad you weren't here a couple a days sooner.
DARRELL Why?
TREY All Daddy's assets been frozen, man.
DARRELL What?
TREY Boudreaux set us up.
DARRELL What are you talking about?
TREY He snuck some of his branded cattle into daddy's barn one night, and then he went and called the cops. And they arrested Daddy for cattle theft.
DARRELL When?
TREY Last night. They got 'em up in Angola.
DARRELL Fuckin' Boudreaux.
TREY And remember I told you we was fixin' the roof on the barn? (*Darrell nods yes*.) Well, Boudreaux claims that it's his corrugated metal that he had on his rodeo that Daddy was usin' for our roofin' materials.
CRYSTAL So there goes the opportunity.
DARRELL We gotta get us a lawyer.
CRYSTAL For what?
DARRELL To make sure that me and Trey hold onto the goddamn land.
CRYSTAL What about your father?
TREY He's in prison.
CRYSTAL The government can just take his land?
TREY That's why he wanted to sign the title over to us before he went.
DARRELL Shit.
TREY Hey, you got some new jewel'ry, Crystal?
CRYSTAL Your brother gave it to me.
TREY That looks like somethin' I had . . . I mean I seen on TV.
CRYSTAL Ain't it pretty though?
TREY You musta been doin' pretty well up there with them Yankees.
DARRELL Yeah, things were startin' to break, you know?
TREY You didn't by any chance pick up that, uh. . . .
DARRELL The shirt?
TREY Yeah, the *I Love New York* t-shirt.
DARRELL Got it right out in the ve-hi-cle. Let me go get it. (*Darrell exits. Crystal kisses Trey.*)
TREY Be careful, baby, he might see us.
CRYSTAL Who cares? (*A dumptruck pulls up outside*.) Hey, the truck's out there.
TREY The sludge man?
CRYSTAL He's here to fill up another hole.
TREY Sometimes you gotta grab the bull by the horns. (*Trey begins to exit*.)
CRYSTAL What are you doin'?
TREY Well, if I can get Darrell to the edge a' one of them holes, just before the sludge man fills it . . . me an' you gonna be cruisin' around in a four-door dualie with a chrome exhaust.
CRYSTAL Hurry up. (*Trey exits. We hear the truck, a struggle, a screaming man falling into an abandoned oil well, sludge being dumped into the hole. Crystal relishes the moment*.) Oh, thank you, God. (*Darrell eventually enters*.)
CRYSTAL What? Where . . . where's Trey?
DARRELL Oh, I . . . went to give Trey his t-shirt, and, he, uh, 'accidentally' fell into one of them holes right before they dumped the sludge in there. But, well, as much as I hate to lose a brother, it might not be all that bad, 'cause that boy was a motherfuckin' liar. That stuff about the arrest, Angola State Prison, a complete fuckin' fabrication.

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CRYSTAL What are you talkin' about?
DARRELL I spoke with Daddy on the phone before Trey showed up at the door. (*Threateningly.*) Don't you hate fuckin' liars, hah? Don't you?
CRYSTAL I . . . I'm so surprised.
DARRELL You never lie, do you?
CRYSTAL Not to you. No. Never.
DARRELL Everybody knew except me.
CRYSTAL What are you talking about?
DARRELL You couldn't even keep it hidden.
CRYSTAL I have nothing to hide.
DARRELL Not now, because it's an open secret.
CRYSTAL I love you more than anything, baby.
DARRELL Well, I'm madder 'n a rained-on rooster 'cause now the whole goddamned town knows you was ballin' my brother. So I'll tell you what . . . we're gonna take a little walk outside and visit one a' them abandoned oil well holes 'fore the sludge man leaves. (*Darrell grabs her, starts to walk outside.*)
CRYSTAL I didn't do anything.
DARRELL You know, I always been straighter than an arrow with you. Never cheated, never made you look bad, and look what you go an' do to me. (*There is a knock at the door.*) With my own fuckin' brother. (*Crystal goes to answer door.*) Don't answer it.
CRYSTAL It might be important.
DARRELL Just shut up and stay still. (*Knocking continues. It becomes louder.*) Sit down. (*Darrell opens door. Drag Queen, played by Trey in drag – the outfit including a hat with a face-covering veil – enters, speaks sort of like a female.*)
DRAG QUEEN Hello, darling.
DARRELL What . . . what are you doing here?
DRAG QUEEN How could I stay away, baby?
DARRELL But . . .
CRYSTAL Didn't I see you on TV?
Drag Queen hugs Darrell.
DARRELL But I told you, I'm married.
DRAG QUEEN I thought you wanted to marry me.
DARRELL Well . . .
DRAG QUEEN That's what you kept sayin'.
CRYSTAL You can have him, okay?
DRAG QUEEN Where did you get that necklace?
DARRELL Oh . . . she's had that for years. It's a family heirloom.
DRAG QUEEN It looks exactly like the one I wore on the Donahue show.
DARRELL It's from her grandmother.
CRYSTAL He just gave it to me.
DARRELL What?
CRYSTAL He said he won it in a gambling bet up in New York.
DARRELL I did not.
DRAG QUEEN You took my diamond necklace?
DARRELL No, I . . .
DRAG QUEEN Someone with whom I was going to spend the rest of my life. . . . With whom I so willingly shared my body.
DARRELL I didn't take anything.
CRYSTAL He's lying.
DRAG QUEEN I came all the way down here from New York for . . . for nothing but a common thief. (*Drag Queen pulls out a pistol.*)
DARRELL I . . . I never took anything. (*Drag Queen shoots Darrell.*)
DRAG QUEEN I think the necklace looks very nice on you. (*Drag Queen removes hat, veil, and wig and becomes Trey.*)
CRYSTAL Really?
TREY Com'ere. (*Trey kisses Crystal, grabs corpse's arms.*) Let's go throw the evidence in the hole before the sludge man leaves. (*They begin to drag corpse away.*)
Lights fade.

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