

where I first learned what it was. With an amateur troupe in Pennsylvania. Stick with me, I think there's stuff here. Like—oh my God—the performance space! Rows of chairs from a church basement set up over there. A slightly raised platform over here. The platform is eight feet by twelve feet. Above it, hanging from the ceiling, are coffee cans painted black with light bulbs in them. And colored cellophane. Held on with rubber bands. It is May of 1973. And a loaf of bread cost—Oh who the fuck cares, I hate when people do that. I am fourteen. I've convinced my parents to let me go to Reading for the day. Officially to go shopping at Pomeroy's. Unofficially...well. I am fourteen. Oh and when I walk in the phone is ringing. No wait, not at first. *(Looks around the room.)* Hello? Hello? *(Car is fourteen. He walks into the front door as if he's walking into a cave. He walks in and walks over to the desk. He sees a knife. He picks it up. Pretty threatening. He touches the tip. It collapses into the handle—it is a prop knife. He does it again. The phone rings. Startled, he quickly puts the knife down. Sid, a woman in coveralls, enters.)*

SID. You hear a phone ring, you answer it, you little fucker. And don't touch the props. *(Answering phone.)* Theater. Prometheus theater. First show's tonight. Sure how many? *(Car clears his throat. Sid glares at him.)* Great. Yeah, opening tonight. Thanks. Curtain's at 8:30. *(As Sid hangs up she writes something on a tablet. Car is about to clear his throat. Sid cuts him off.)* And you, Camille, what? You coughing up a lung?

CAR. I was just in town doing some work. Killing time before my bus. Thought I could help out. It said in the paper—

SID. Christ we're desperate. Well, that set don't paint itself. *(She walks back to the stage, he follows.)* What's your name?

CAR. Car.

SID. Ho ho. You must be a Wyomissing boy or are your parents just climbers?

CAR. Wyomissing.

SID. Just paint the side there. *(Watches him paint.)* Well, that sucks.

MARIA. *(Enters with a largish box.)* Howdy doody.

SID. Maria, you better have programs!

MARIA. I have programs. That is such a not-nice greeting. Wouldn't you know, I park all the way up by the freakin' pagoda almost, I swear to you, and what's sitting here, in front of the theater? Bright as a button? Parking spaces. Spaces for days. Sid, we have to run the Bala Cynwyd scene, I am not getting the lines there.

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SID. You wanna? Aren't you afraid it will lose some of the spontaneity of the moment?

MARIA. But if I'm searching for the line—

SID. But I like that look on your face. It's like you don't know what you're going to say next. That first show you did at Civic Players you had that look on your face. It was very memorable.

MARIA. I was playing Helen Keller! We'll ask Irene, or this kid can run lines—you read? Sprechen Sie English? Honey, why are you here?

SID. Car, that's Maria, she's the neediest actress in the world and that's saying something. Maria that's Car. He's from Wyomissing and he wants to paint so be nice to him. Paint! Ooh, heads up Maria, watch out for stage left, it's still wet.

CAR. (*Looking at the theater space.*) Is this where the show happens? Sorta small. (*Clive, an African American gentleman in knee-high boots, breezes in. The Roscoe Lee Browne of Southeastern Pennsylvania, with women's hats piled high atop his head.*)

CLIVE. And so the beautiful girl breezes into her Manhattan apartment and kisses her sister.

SID. Hats, thank the Lord!

MARIA. Oh wait—I know this—

CLIVE. Kisses her grandfather—

MARIA. Don't tell me—

SID. (*Doing the scene.*) Hello, Alice.

MARIA and SID. *You Can't Take It with You!*

MARIA. The only show title they never shorten, have you ever noticed? "What did you do this season?" "Oh *Forum*, *Greasepaint*, *Marat/Sade*, *Oh Dad*, and *You Can't Take It with You*."

CLIVE. (*Coming in on her "Greasepaint" and speaking over her.*) And kisses the not entirely unattractive white boy.

SID. Now Clive, leave him be.

MARIA. I mean even *Hello, Dolly!* people just call *Dolly*. Don't you—

CLIVE. For the love of God, Maria, those of us in the know refer to it as *Can't Take It with You*. (*A big cry face from Maria.*)

SID. Now the waterworks.

MARIA. (*Through sobs.*) I have worked in this area's theaters for SEASONS and nobody pays me any attention it's all Irene and SID and CLIVE and SPECIAL SPECIAL LARRY AND GAIL AND BARBARA PRUSSMAN—and ooh isn't Kurt something and now even a snotty rich kid from Wyomissing gets more attention than

me, you people are all MONGOLOIDS!! *(She storms out the front door and down the street.)*

SID. I don't think she even knows what "mongoloids" means. So, Car—

CLIVE. First name?

CAR. Yeah.

CLIVE. Love.

SID. Just finish up and then you can go Car.

CLIVE. No, don't discard him. Put him onstage. There are never any boys in Reading productions. It's all ladies and queens—whenever you see a photo from a past play you wonder—was there a war on during this show's run?

MARIA. *(Reenters.)* I think I feel a lot better now.

CLIVE. Little Maria, come here that I might hold you and lavish attention upon you.

MARIA. Just openings are so—I'm just raw nerves, like all over. And, you know, a whole new theater and—

CLIVE. Of course. And the mean boy from Wyomissing is going away.

MARIA. It's all my fault. Berks County has lost another male actor because of my ego. First Randy Geissinger now this one.

CAR. I'm not an actor. I'll just go—I have to catch the 8:15 bus back to Wyo anyways. I was just killin' time till the bus came. I don't need to be here.

SID. Heads up! Light check. We're going dark. Nobody move. *(She flips the house lights off. And the stage lights on. Pools of light appear on the stage.)*

CAR. *(Looking at lights.)* Whoa. Cool. *(Sid turns those lights off and a new set on. Irene is there.)*

IRENE. *(Strikes a dramatic pose.)* Oy.

MARIA. Irene!

IRENE. I tell you, if theater was easy, the goyim would do it. *(As Irene talks she casually takes off her blouse and meanders around in her bra.)*

SID. Here she is! *(She turns the house lights back on.)* So?

IRENE. I met with Jo Jo Fancy Pants, Mr. City Commissioner. He gave us the building. Official. Well a handshake. *(General cheer.)* Ours all ours.

SID. Till they tear it down.

IRENE. Onward and upward with the arts!

SID. Jo Jo's handshake ain't worth shit. What about the mayor?

IRENE. I did not visit Mayor McCheese.

SID. She doesn't even know the name of the town's mayor.

IRENE. Lackey, Winton Lackey, are you quite quite happy now, you machashaifeh?

SID. No. You only did half of what I told you to do. And I don't see your husband, Ben, here helping out— *(From out of the desk drawer Irene pulls an Emilio Pucci caftan. As she continues talking, she whips the caftan over her head and removes her slacks. All while keeping the cigarette in her mouth.)*

IRENE. Lesbians are not a merry people per se. I think it's because they esteem the working class, all that flannel and yard work. Now gay men—they dream of being queens, and I for one relish them. Who is this? Where are you from boy? Wyomissing? Getting an eyeful of the black pansies? The bull dykes? The chatty yentas? The whole mishpocha?

CLIVE. I adore you.

IRENE. And I, you. I shall mount a production of *Emperor Jones* for you, so help me.

CLIVE. I'm more of a "Shirley Jones."

IRENE. Tonight we open—a new show, a new theater, a new company, a new beginning! *(Applause.)*

SID. I hope we don't suck.

IRENE. You're being a bitch, but I say NOTHING.

SID. Thank you, Irene. *(Car touches the knife, pushes the blade in.)*

IRENE. Boychick, please do not touch the properties, some of them are quite, quite valuable.

CLIVE. Dewar's, sweet pet? *(Pulling bottle from attaché case.)*

IRENE. Never. Not before a performance. Wait. Who's the writer this time?

MARIA. Philip Barry

IRENE. *(Indicates Clive should pour.)* Well he wrote it with a light on, I should perform it with a light on. *(Pause.)* You there, new boy— Could you hand me from my purse a blue pill. I feel dizzy again.

CLIVE. Irene, I don't mean to be demanding—but could the actors have a dressing room?

IRENE. *(Looking at Car, who is just looking at her open purse.)* Blue pill blue pill.

CAR. What shade of blue?

IRENE. This one.

SID. What's with the pills, Irene? Your purse looks like Marilyn Monroe's nightstand.

IRENE. (*Grabbing pill.*) Now Clive I would love to get you a dressing room, but there's simply no room—pity too, there's nothing but empty buildings around. (*She takes the pill with a swig of Dewar's.*)

SID. Don't even think of taking over another building here, Jo Jo gave us permission for this building only. He sees us waltzing in and out of—

IRENE. Wait! Stop! Everyone!

SID. Reenie, don't.

IRENE. What?

SID. I see that look in your eyes—that's the look when someone artistic is going to try to make real-world decisions.

IRENE. I've got it. Let's knock a hole in the wall, use the building next door, just no one use the front door. Jo Jo will never be the wiser.

CLIVE. I love it.

IRENE. Sid, get the sledgehammer.

SID. You don't have to say that sentence twice to a bull-dyke! (*She is off. The sound of banging and Sid grunting continues for a while.*)

CLIVE. Now why didn't you go to the mayor's office and get us two buildings?

IRENE. Oh now you mock me, you nail me to your cross, I know how you Christians treat a Jewish person.

CLIVE. If they're gonna knock this one down, we're gonna need a new one.

IRENE. You taunt me, you hurt me.

MARIA. (*Singing "So in Love."*) Deceive me!

CLIVE. Desert me!

IRENE. (*All others laugh and talk amongst themselves, only Car is watching.*) Schmucks! Schmendricks! Why do I bother with this hole-in-the-wall theater in the first place—deserted storefront theater. I should be in New York, I should be working with Hal Prince, with Alan Schneider, Tom O'Horgan, but for the curse of my loveless marriage I am stuck here amongst the AMISH trying to put on Ionesco, I should be dead! I wish to GOD I WERE DEAD LIKE MY MOTHER!! (*She grabs the retractable prop knife and plunges it into her heart. Car jumps up and screams; the others are oblivious.*)

CAR. NO!! (*The others all look at Car.*)

IRENE. Why is the Wyomissing boy the only one in this theater who is in the moment?

SID. (*Stepping back in, covered in dust.*) Because he's the only one who hasn't seen you do the death-by-prop-knife routine seventeen

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times. Because— *(The phone rings.)* AAAAAAAH whaleshit!! You did it last Thursday when we ran out of black paint— *(Answering the phone.)* Prometheus Theater. *(She continues to talk into the phone.)*

MARIA. *(Continuing over Sid.)* Ooh, Irene, I should tell you because Sid will forget. The downstage left area, the paint on the floor is still going to be wet. So if you have—

IRENE. Oy! Nebekh, I focused all the lights in that corner, because that's where I imagined the bay window was. All my monologues are there and I have to be—I could lean dramatically from the mantle—that would look artistic.

MARIA. You might seem a little deranged.

IRENE. Big choices. Big results.

SID. *(Shouting to the room.)* Fred needs a ride in to the theater tonight.

MARIA. Again?

IRENE. What's Fred playing in this show?

MARIA. The butler!!

IRENE. Who'll go out and get him? Clive?

CLIVE. I am parked in a spot right in front of the theater and I am not giving that space up for Lyndon Baines Johnson.

MARIA. Black people love him.

IRENE. Maria?

MARIA. Oh for—I'm parked almost clear up to the pagoda and Fred lives in godforsaken Oley. We might be able to get here for intermission. What a cop-out, we're doing a Philip Barry play without a butler.

SID. Should we just cut it? What do I say to Fred?

MARIA. But the butler represents God. Where do we say God is?

SID. Listen, can someone deal with me?

IRENE. Tell him we're with him in spirit and to do all he can to be here tomorrow.

MARIA. Or if he can get here later, meet us at the Crystal for the opening night party!

IRENE. You—Wyomissing. You're a star as of now.

CLIVE. Right on, Right on!! *(All agree and applaud.)*

CAR. What's going on?

IRENE. You're going to play the butler, whatever he's called—see the part is so small I can't even remember the name of it. No lines. You play the butler: You carry a tray and look at people onstage and then we talk and act at you, it's so simple—