CONTACT INFORMATION:

Maureen Kane Berg 4137 Drew Avenue South Minneapolis, Minnesota 55410 USA (612)920-0236 maureenkaneberg@gmail.com

DECOMPOSITION

Cast of Characters

- Perry Pippin (Teacher): The teacher of a playwriting class. A dissolute former success. He had one successful musical ten years earlier; he has this gig teaching playwriting at a local community center after the original (serious) playwright had to drop out at the last minute.
- Helen (Student 1): A mousy accountant who is writing an earnest play about an accounting scandal.
- John (Student 2) Young husband whose marriage is falling apart. His play is a tortured love story.
- Christine (Student 3): Professor of Anthropology/History who has decided to turn some of her research into a play about a woman who is studying apes in the African jungle.
- Anastasia (Student 4): She is the Teacher's fan. She has joined the class mostly to give him enthusiastic support.

<u>Time</u>

The present.

<u>Synopsis</u>

A diverse group of aspiring playwrights has gathered at the local community center for a class by the local theater auteur. When the teacher is replaced at the last minute by Perry Pippin – a dissolute character with one successful musical in his past, the class takes an unexpected turn. (Please note: there is no actual music in this piece, although Perry does chant his way through a few lyrics.)

SETTING: Classroom or conference room at a suburban community center.

AT RISE: Four chairs are in a diagonal line. Christine and John are already seated. Anastasia enters.

ANASTASIA

Is this the class for writing musicals?

CHRISTINE

What? No – this is the playwriting seminar.

ANASTASIA

That's it.

CHRISTINE

Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you said musicals.

ANASTASIA

Didn't you get the email?

(At this moment, the teacher, Perry, arrives, followed immediately by Helen. Perry conducts the class standing – he is very animated.)

PERRY

Hello, class. By way of introduction, I'd like to go around the room. Each of you should introduce yourselves and give a short synopsis of the piece you are writing.

(He nods to Helen, who is still getting settled.)

HELEN

Me? Oh, okay. Well, I'm Helen. I'm an accountant. I took a course on accounting ethics last year, and one of the case studies was just fascinating, I thought it would make a great play. It's about the use of stock options in CEO compensation.

(Perry nods to Christine next.)

CHRISTINE

I am Christine. I am a Professor of History at the University, where I specialize in the History of Anthropology. My play is a one-woman show about an anthropologist who is in her eighteenth month observing apes in the African jungle without any human contact. It takes place entirely inside her tent, and mostly inside her head.

PERRY

Okay.

(*He turns to John.*)

JOHN

(Very intense and tortured.)

I'm John. My play explores love. Can love last? How does love give life meaning? Fundamentally, what is love?

PERRY

Very good.

(*He turns to Anastasia.* We see the faintest smile of understanding between them.)

ANASTASIA

I don't have a piece written, but I heard that you were teaching this class, so I enrolled. I want to learn everything I can from you, particularly how to write lyrics.

(The other students look confused.)

PERRY

Great! Well, as I'm sure you've surmised by now – I'm your teacher for this course – Perry Pippin – you've probably heard of <u>Gone To Seed</u> – I wrote that.

JOHN

(always knowledgeable about the theater – he's showing off a bit)

That's a musical, isn't it?

ANASTASIA

Not just any musical – it ran in New York for fifteen months!

PERRY

(With a false modesty)

Off Broadway.

JOHN

I do remember it – sort of an <u>Oklahoma</u> meets <u>Sweeney Todd</u> --when did it run?

PERRY

1989-90. So when Sam Masters had to drop out of teaching this class, they turned to me. I had some time open in my schedule, and I agreed to take you all on. Now having heard the topics of your shows – I'm very excited. One of my core tenets is that the modern musical can take on any subject matter. We are really going to put my theory to the test in this class!

CHRISTINE

Excuse me – the modern musical?

HELEN

Isn't this supposed to be the play writing seminar?

ANASTASIA

That's what I was saying earlier – they were supposed to send out an email notifying everyone that we were so lucky to get Mr. Pippin – and they naturally had to adjust the class to his expertise.

CHRISTINE

What happened to Sam Masters? Is he teaching somewhere else?

HELEN

My play isn't a musical.

JOHN

None of ours is.

PERRY

Hold on now – that's just my point. Any play **can** be a musical.

HELEN

I don't know how to write music.

ANASTASIA

I write music. I'd be happy to help set your lyrics to music, if you need it.

JOHN

I don't know – my story is very serious. It's about a young husband whose wife is leaving him, just because . . . well, I guess you have to read it.

PERRY

Let's do that – you all brought excerpts, right? Helen – why don't you pass yours around.

HELEN

(hesitatingly – she pulls out some pages and passes them around)

Okay. In this scene, my heroine is composing an email to the Chairman of the Board, outlining her concerns about the accounting standards for reporting the true cost of the CEO's stock options to the shareholders.

PERRY

(looking over the pages, he assigns parts)

Christine – could you read the part of Ellen – the accountant? And . . . that's the only part – but John – why don't you read the stage directions?

JOHN

"Ellen is seated at her desk typing on her computer. As she types, she speaks the words aloud."

CHRISTINE

"Dear Mr. Chairman – I am writing to alert you to a number of violations of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act's provisions requiring timely disclosures to the shareholders of a publicly-held company. \dots

PERRY

(nearly shouting in excitement)

Hold it right there. This is a perfect scene for a song! The audience won't buy that she says everything aloud as she types - but if she sings it, it becomes her thoughts - something is coming to me ...

(he scribbles on his notepad and chants his way through these lines as he comes up with them; he is nearly singing, and he moves about as though envisioning and acting out a dance)

Mr. Chairman . . .

After thought I sit down to compose this epistle My conscience is saying I must blow the whistle As an honest accountant, I report that I saw Violations of the Sarbanes and Oxley law

You see how the song allows your heroine to speak her mind – she can also get up and move during a song – I'm seeing an elegant ballet with the heroine alone on stage – struggling with her epic questions that pit the good of the world against her own self-interest.

(Helen is awestruck by this vision. Anastasia leans in to nudge Helen and nod, as if to say "Isn't he great?" Perry hands Helen his notes of the lvrics)

Here's a start for you.

(turns to John) John – you're next. What do you have for us?

JOHN

(hands his pages around) Anastasia – could you read Lupe (he pronounces all the names with a strong Spanish accent. He next looks inquiringly at Perry) Would you do Juan? (to Helen)

You could read the stage directions?

HELEN

"Juan arrives at the home of Lupe's mother. Lupe is in the yard, hanging clothes on the line. Juan strides up behind Lupe, grabs her arm as she is about to pin something to the line, and spins her around. Clothes pin and clothes item go flying as she turns to face him."

PERRY

Lupe – I found this note in our kitchen. How can you write this to me, when you know how much I love you?

ANASTASIA

Oh, Juan - You do not know how to love a woman!

PERRY

And does a woman run home to her mama at the first sign of trouble? You do not know how to be a woman!

ANASTASIA

I am too much woman for you.

(*There is a pause.*)

JOHN

It's your line, Mr. Pippin.

PERRY

No – I know. I'm feeling a tango. (He grabs his pad and pen again. As he writes, he tangos about the room) You know what you mean to me! Ay caramba – how can you flee? (In a higher-pitched voice.) You don't give me what I need A woman should not have to plead (Lower again.) Once or twice I tell you "No." And off to mama's house you go!

JOHN

How did you . . . – that's amazing. I hadn't thought of doing it that way.

PERRY

See how much dimension the music adds? (*Tears off the sheet of paper for John and turns to Christine.*) What have you got for us Christine? *To see remainder of this script, contact me at maureenkaneberg@gmail.com*