

THE EXHIBIT

by

Duke Harten

dukeharten@gmail.com  
401-215-5563

*Note: Two actors are sufficient (each one playing a different role every time he or she appears onstage) or a whole company might be used (one actor per role).*

*Gender, age, and race of actors are unimportant.*

*All that's required for the set is one piece of ART. The art could be a painting, a statue, a television screen showing Bambi's mother being shot. It could even be nothing at all, as long as the audience understands that the characters are visiting a piece of ART.*

*Another note: Whether actors ENTER stage right and EXIT stage left is immaterial, as long as the ENTERS and EXITS are consistent. In other words, if the first duo enters stage right and exits stage left, every other character must repeat that pattern.*

*LIGHTS UP on a piece of ART. Presently, two ACADEMICS enter and behold the piece.*

ACADEMIC 1

Self-indulgent.

ACADEMIC 2

You think so?

ACADEMIC 1

Cheap. Uninventive. Derivative, even.

ACADEMIC 2

Derivative of whom?

ACADEMIC 1

McNair, among others. McNair's early work. Shades of Hendrickson. An obvious and pronounced Stengel influence. You'd have to be blind not to see that.

ACADEMIC 2

Stengel, sure. But influence is natural, even necessary.

ACADEMIC 1

"Influence" is a gentle word for what I meant. This is plagiarism.

ACADEMIC 2

That's an uncharitable diagnosis.

ACADEMIC 1

If we were in the business of charity, perhaps Rachel Parker Scott would've seen a little more mainstream success.

*They laugh.*

## ACADEMIC 2

Well said.

*EXIT. ENTER a MARRIED COUPLE looking at a map. They fail to look at the ART a single time during their exchange.*

WIFE

Here's the big red dot: "You Are Here." How does it know where we are?

HUSBAND

That's the kiosk we picked it up at. It doesn't follow us around.

WIFE

I know it doesn't follow us around. I'm not stupid.

HUSBAND

"How does it know where we are," you said.

WIFE

I was thinking out loud.

HUSBAND

It's not the Marauder's Map is my point. The dot can't move.

WIFE

That's good to know because I thought it was the Marauder's Map. I thought the laws of the natural universe had changed and the red dot could move around, tracking us, on this piece of paper.

HUSBAND

That isn't the case. It's just a map.

WIFE

Something heavy should fall on you.

HUSBAND

A piano.

WIFE

A piano is good. An anvil.

HUSBAND

Mercy plummeting from the sky at terminal velocity.

WIFE

Operative word being "terminal."

HUSBAND

Have you got it figured out yet? Let me take a look.

WIFE

I don't need a man to help me read a map.

HUSBAND

Gender doesn't enter it. I could be a blind, deaf, one-armed Malaysian sweatshop worker -- female -- and be better at reading this map than you are.

WIFE

Be quiet, please.

HUSBAND

It's a matter of navigational prowess. Which you, despite your other talents, sorely lack.

WIFE

Hush.

HUSBAND

And which I, man or not, have some measure of competence in. So if I could just take a peek.

WIFE

I think I've got it figured. Is this Art of the Ancients?

HUSBAND

All clues point to no, it is not.

WIFE

Well, fuck me.

HUSBAND

If I had a nickel.

WIFE

Yeah? If you had a nickel?

HUSBAND

I'd have three nickels.

WIFE

It's this way.

HUSBAND

Bet you fifteen cents you're wrong.

*EXIT. ENTER two TEENAGE GIRLS.*

GIRL 1

Hold on, I like this one.

GIRL 2

Yeah, definitely.

*GIRL 1 surrenders her phone to GIRL 2, then goes to pose in front of the ART. GIRL 2 takes several photos, then GIRL 1 returns and they huddle over the phone. Neither of them face the ART.*

Try Lo-Fi. GIRL 2 (CONT'D)

Lo-Fi is too saturated. GIRL 1

Juno. GIRL 2

Same thing. GIRL 1

You look super cute. GIRL 2

Oh my God, I forgot. Katie told me Charlie called Mrs. Hammersley an idiot yesterday. GIRL 1

Like, to her face? GIRL 2

Yeah, like, in class. GIRL 1

Holy shit. GIRL 2

I know. Isn't that fucked up? GIRL 1

I mean, she is an idiot, but like... GIRL 2

But like, her husband just died. GIRL 1

Right. GIRL 2

That's Charlie, though. Fucking dick. GIRL 1

He'd be hot if he wasn't such an asshole all the time. GIRL 2

He's still kind of hot. GIRL 1

GIRL 2  
Yeah, but like, I wouldn't fuck him.

GIRL 1  
Oh, no, of course not.

GIRL 2  
I mean, unless I was like super drunk.

GIRL 1  
Yeah.

*EXIT. ENTER two BOYS. An overlong pause as the BOYS admire the piece.*

BOY 1  
Dude.

BOY 2  
I know, dude.

*EXIT. ENTER an OLD COUPLE, shuffling along. They stop to study the piece.*

OLD MAN  
Do you get it?

OLD WOMAN  
Yeah. Do you?

OLD MAN  
Yeah.

OLD WOMAN  
Me too. I get it.

OLD MAN  
I was just kidding. I don't get it.

OLD WOMAN  
Nobody does. The artist wants us to feel it here, on the tip of our tongue. It's shrouded in ambiguity.

OLD MAN  
Maybe we're old.

OLD WOMAN  
We are old.

OLD MAN  
I mean, maybe we don't get it because we're old.

OLD WOMAN  
Maybe.

*EXIT. ENTER a MOTHER and CHILD. The MOTHER stops to absorb the piece. The CHILD fidgets.*

CHILD

Mom.

(a beat)

Mom.

MOTHER

Yeah.

CHILD

Can we go?

MOTHER

Look at this. It's beautiful.

CHILD

I'm bored.

MOTHER

I know, honey.

CHILD

I'm so bored. This is so boring.

MOTHER

A lot of kids never have the opportunity to see stuff like this.

CHILD

That sounds awesome for them.

MOTHER

What do you feel like for dinner?

CHILD

Tacos.

MOTHER

How did I know.

*EXIT. ENTER a BABY, crawling with frantic joy across the floor. A moment later the FATHER follows.*

FATHER

Hey, you little shit.

*He picks the BABY up, holds the BABY against his hip. BABY sucks its thumb or coos or does whatever babies do.*

FATHER (CONT'D)

Now, lookit that. You were gonna scoot right past that.

*He regards the ART for a while.*

FATHER (CONT'D)

Mom liked this sort of thing. She dragged me here I don't know how many times. I don't get it. I used to think nobody gets it. But you could tell when she came here, it meant something to her. Not this one -- this one's new. But they're all fundamentally the same in some way. Inspire a reaction, tell the truth, et cetera. Don't drool on me. I don't know if it makes her better than me, that she felt something here. I know she was better than me. I just don't know if this is part of it, or if we're just different.

*The BABY fidgets.*

FATHER (CONT'D)

Oh, you're ready to go. OK.

*He puts the BABY down and it crawls offstage happily. The FATHER regards the ART for another long moment and then drifts offstage to retrieve his child.*

*ENTER a BOY and GIRL on a first date.*

BOY

So, do you have siblings?

GIRL

Yeah. I have two brothers. You?

BOY

One brother, one sister.

GIRL

Is she older than you?

BOY

How do you know Hugh?

GIRL

What?

BOY

Do you know Hugh?

GIRL

Who's Hugh?

BOY

My brother.

GIRL

Is she older than you, I said.



BOY  
Oh. Sorry. Yeah. I'm in the middle.

GIRL  
So Hugh is the youngest?

BOY  
Yeah.

GIRL  
Cool.

BOY  
Yeah.

GIRL  
My brothers are both older.

BOY  
Cool.

GIRL  
Yeah.

BOY  
Cool.

GIRL  
The Egyptian room was pretty cool.

BOY  
The security guard kept looking at me.

GIRL  
You were trying to touch the sarcophagus.

BOY  
I wasn't trying.

GIRL  
You kept saying it.

BOY  
I was just kidding.

GIRL  
Yeah, but it's like with the police, you can't wave a gun even if it's just plastic.

BOY  
Yeah, I guess.

(a beat)  
Egyptians played board games.

GIRL

Really?

BOY

Yeah. And some pharaohs were even buried with them.

GIRL

Cool.

BOY

Want to go to the next one?

GIRL

Sure.

*EXIT. ENTER a SUIT on his phone.*

SUIT

...which I don't even know why he'd say that in the first place. It was Raphael who closed the deal, he didn't have a damn thing to do with it. He wasn't in Mexico City and he sure wasn't in the room when we signed the fucking papers. So you can tell him to unpuff that faggy little chest of his or I'll have him working in the fucking mailroom by Monday morning. Not a literal mailroom because hello, who the fuck sends mail, but you get what I'm saying. Did I say faggy? Don't repeat that. He sat in on all of what, two meetings, and then he has the balls to -- hello? Can you hear me? Yeah. I can hear you. Sorry, the reception here is prehistoric. I'm at the museum. Don't ask me why. Ask my three-hundred-dollar-an-hour therapist why. She wants me to smell the roses a little more she says. Take some time to think about something besides money. Go to a museum. See a play. You know how expensive roses are? That's why I think about money. It cost me twenty-seven dollars to get in here today. And do they have free WiFi? I'll give you a hint: they do not. In any event, I'm supposed to devote at least an hour a week to doing some sort of liberal arts rose-sniffing like this and I told her listen, honey, if I'm not seeing serious and tangible side effects re: my personal energy and/or happiness by the end of the month she can take her psych degree and perform impure acts on herself with it. But hey, what do I know, I'm just the guy who makes two point five a year and that's before my bonus...

*EXIT. ENTER two SECURITY GUARDS.*

GUARD 1

So not only does he not give me the weekend after Christmas off but he's making me work the Featured Exhibit, which if you haven't heard, Gus is keeping the Christmas thing up until New Year's and doing a steep discount so you can imagine all the cheapos bringing their kids in --

GUARD 2

Jesus.

GUARD 1

-- so the likelihood of me a) spending an entire post-Xmas weekend screaming at children to keep their hands off and b) contracting some sort of virus or rare strain of influenza from the unwashed masses is roughly --

GUARD 2

One hundred percent.

GUARD 1

One hundred percent.

GUARD 2

Speaking of hands off --

GUARD 1

The little creep in Egypt just now?

GUARD 2

You know he was going for that sarcophagus.

GUARD 1

I'da fuckin' belted him.

GUARD 2

Trying to impress the girl.

GUARD 1

I used to like kids, you know.

GUARD 2

This job'll do that.

GUARD 1

I used to like art, come to think of it.

*EXIT. ENTER PARENT and ARTIST.*

ARTIST

This is it.

*The PARENT walks up and inspects the thing. Takes his/her sweet old time. Steps back and stands next to the ARTIST.*

PARENT

How long did it take?

ARTIST

Nine months, on and off.

PARENT

I don't know what to say.

*They stand in silence for thirty seconds.*

PARENT (CONT'D)

It's incredible.

*Another thirty seconds.*

PARENT (CONT'D)

I'm so proud of you.

ARTIST

OK. Well, now you've seen it.

*ARTIST moves off. PARENT still stands in awe of the thing. Another MUSEUM GUEST wanders along, looking down at his phone.*

PARENT

Hey. Did you see this?

GUEST

Oh, yeah.

*Guest snaps a photo of the thing and continues along, still looking at his phone. As the PARENT continues to behold the work, lights gradually FADE TO BLACK.*

*CURTAIN.*