

Off-Line

an act with actors

by

Mark Steven Jensen

This play was created through a grant from the Ensemble Studio Theatre/Sloan Foundation in partnership with the Playwrights' Center of Minneapolis

Developed in collaboration with Michelle Hutchinson,
Randy Reyes, Erik Hoover, Clarence Wethern, Emily
Gunyou Halaas, Amy McDonald, Tim Wilkens, Michael
Kinghorn, and Nancy Kawalek

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PERFORMANCE NOTE

This play is a companion piece to ON-LINE and should be performed after ON-LINE as a second act. In contrast to the previous play, all the actors appear live onstage. Several of the same actors from the previous act play roles in this companion piece.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

JOHANN – A man who has been trying for years to become a filmmaker. In his mid to late thirties, he is directing the production of ON-LINE. JOHANN also plays DELIVERY MAN TWO in ON-LINE.

MAUREEN – JOHANN’s wife and camera operator for ON-LINE. Also in her mid to late thirties, she has spent the past ten years with her life on hold, devoted to JOHANN’s obsession with mounting this play. She plays the MESSENGER in ON-LINE.

NICK – A former sitcom child star who now lives alone in an apartment. He works as a part-time carpet cleaner. In his thirties, he plays JOHN in ON-LINE.

HOLLY – A former child star who once co-starred on the same sitcom with NICK. She now acts in “B” horror movies. Early thirties, she plays MARY in ON-LINE.

PHILLIP – A recent immigrant to the United States, he has aspirations of becoming a famous actor. In his late twenties – early thirties, he primarily is the sound technician for the production. His specific nationality is up to the actor; PHILLIP’s dialogue can be adjusted to reflect the nationality selected for the role.

CONNIE – A part-time voice over actor and community college acting coach. In her late forties to early fifties, she plays ANNABELLE in ON-LINE.

TIME AND PLACE

The set for ON-LINE. The production has not yet opened. It is the second day of June.

DEVELOPMENT HISTORY

EXPERIMENTAL WORKSHOP

OFF-LINE began as an experimental workshop co-sponsored by the Ensemble Studio Theatre/Sloan Initiative and the Playwrights' Center of Minneapolis. The purpose of the workshop was to develop a companion play for ON-LINE.

During the workshop, actors improvised various situations either loosely based or directly related to ON-LINE. These improvisations were recorded and are the creative foundation for this companion play.

Actors who participated in the workshop were Michelle Hutchinson, Randy Reyes, Erik Hoover, Clarence Wethern, Emily Gunyou Halaas, and Amy McDonald. The workshop was stage managed by Tim Wilkens. Michael Kinghorn was the dramaturg. The workshop was directed by Nancy Kawalek and it took place Nov. 19-24, 2008 at the Playwrights' Center of Minneapolis.

(SETTING: The studio apartment set for ON-LINE, but now the set is a work-in-progress.)

(Some sections of the apartment's facade are turned sideways, revealing the backside of flats. Some sections of the walls are attached with duct tape.)

(All five of the SCREENS from the previous play are turned off. SCREEN 4, the largest screen, has a number of wires sticking out from behind it. The screen is not hooked up yet. SCREEN 3, the security monitor, hangs limply near the stage entrance to the set.)

(The various appliances in the kitchen are placed in the same general area as the previous play. The oven is turned around, revealing this set piece is just an empty shell with the singed pan inside.)

(The washing machine is in the same location it was in the previous play, but now the washing machine doesn't have a dent in it.)

(The area of the set most complete is the space around the video camera. Identical to its placement in ON-LINE, the camera is mounted in front of a chair. Behind the chair is a picture of a beach. Laid over the back of this chair is a suit coat, pressed shirt, and a tie.)

(The hanging corpse is noticeably absent. However, the rope is still fastened around the ceiling fan, but this rope is tied off to keep it out of the way.)

(AT RISE: JOHANN and NICK are performing the DELIVERY MAN TWO scene from ON-LINE. These two individuals are the same actors that appeared in these roles during the previous play.)

(MAUREEN is running the video camera while JOHANN and NICK act out the scene around the chair. PHILLIP stands just out of frame holding a boom microphone.)

(CONNIE watches intently, holding a script. HOLLY sits on a chair away from the rest of the cast; she is knitting a toque.)

JOHANN (DELIVERY MAN 2)

I shouldn't, company policy, I gotta--

NICK (JOHN)

No, sit, Fido, sit. Woof!

(NICK pushes JOHANN back into the chair.)

NICK (CONT.)

Can I give you some milk? You deliver such high quality milk. What's the name of the creamery where you get that milk? It's great.

JOHANN

I don't know. We get our perishables from some distributor.

NICK

Fascinating, fascinating. Do you ever go to that distributor's warehouse? What color is the building?

(MAUREEN zooms the camera close to JOHANN's face. PHILLIP gets the boom mike closer to JOHANN.)

JOHANN

Is that one of your survey questions?

NICK

A hobby of mine is warehouse architecture. Okay, onto the personal statistics. Do you have any kids?

JOHANN

Nope. Bachelor, just like you.

NICK

I'm not a bachelor! See this, this is a ring. I am happily married! My wife is just on a business trip! She's coming back here this Christmas and we're... we're... ungh...

MAUREEN

Parents.

NICK

(Breaks character.)

Fuck!

(Everybody is visibly frustrated.)

MAUREEN

You've nearly got it. Just remember parents.

NICK

Apologies, I get into the moment...

JOHANN

It's there Nick, it's really there. Truly impressive by how much you keep your energy up every single take. But you need to. Finish. The. Line.

MAUREEN

You're finding crazy good emotion, truly. Just remember the whole line. Please.

NICK

...Happily married... Wife, business trip, coming back Christmas, baby, parents--
(Notices HOLLY is watching.)
And fuck you too Holly. Do not give me that look. I'll get through it!

HOLLY

What?

NICK

You gave me that look. And I know that look. I grew up with that look! I'll get it this next take, keep knitting whatever it is you're knitting. It's really nice.

HOLLY

O...kay. So. Now your drug addicted mind is imagining that I desire to communicate, mano a mano, with you? I've been sitting over here, right here, all day, trying my damndest not to talk to you, or grunt when you screw up a simple shot, or, heaven forbid, give you a look! You stupid, conceited dick fuck! When we started this gig, what did I fucking tell you? WHAT DID I FUCKING TELL YOU?

NICK

Whoa, Holly, okay, apologies.

HOLLY

SAY IT ASSHOLE!

PHILLIP

(Whispers excitedly to CONNIE.)

They even scream like Hollywood actors!

CONNIE

(Whispering to PHILLIP.)

Phil, this isn't professional.

JOHANN

We need to get back to the shot.

HOLLY

Before you do the forty-fifth take, or whatever the hell it is, he needs to say it, or I'm gone. I am fucking out that door unless he says it, the whole statement, right here, right now, in front of everybody.

JOHANN

(Mutters to MAUREEN.)

We don't have time for this...

MAUREEN

Would you please say it Nick, whatever it is? We can only afford you and Holly for two more days.

NICK

This isn't necessary, Holly!

HOLLY

You just made it necessary, shit wad. Okay, leaving....

NICK

Holly stay here. Stay. I'll say it. I'LL SAY IT! ...What she said to me was... If you so much as breathe on a single hair follicle on my body, I'll fucking... I'll fucking cut off your pecker, make you eat it raw, and then sue you for assault. There. Does that make you joyful?

(CONNIE, MAUREEN, and JOHANN bravely manage not to laugh. PHILLIP is horrified.)

HOLLY

Ecstatic. Now pull your cocaine damaged head out of your hairy ass, and get through. The. Stupid. Fucking. Line!

NICK

Okay, Holly. End the moment!

HOLLY

Agreed. Moment ended. Prick.

(Goes back to her knitting.)

JOHANN

We need to... We need to start from the same place. Nick?

NICK

Huh? Yeah, same place. Right.

MAUREEN

Once you say parents, you'll do the whole line.

PHILLIP

(Too enthusiastically.)

I thought the scene was amazing, Nick, it really was! I loved it!

NICK

Let me test run it again, just need to remember...

JOHANN

Whenever you are ready.

CONNIE

Get back to your center, Nick. Focus on that. And your deep breathing. Allow it in, allow it out. Allow it in, allow it out.

(CONNIE quietly takes some deep relaxing breathes. NICK copies her and calms down. When he's focused...)

NICK

(Very fast speed line review.)

I am happily married! My wife is just on a business trip! She's coming back here this Christmas and we're parents! We just had a baby! See here's our wedding picture. We are a happy couple! Look at it! Happy! ...Did I do it?

MAUREEN

Dead on, word for word.

NICK

Okay, let's do this, Delivery Man Two, accuse me of being single. I'll show you.

JOHANN

You think you'll show me, huh?

NICK

Oh shit will I show you!

JOHANN

Maureen?

MAUREEN

Picture is up. Quiet please... Turnover.

PHILLIP

Speed.

MAUREEN

Frame. and... Action.

NICK

Okay, onto the personal statistics. Do you have any kids?

JOHANN

Nope. Bachelor, just like you.

NICK

I'm not a bachelor! See this, this is a ring.

(NICK shoves his hand in front of the camera.)

I am happily married! My wife is just on a business trip! She's coming back here this Christmas and we're parents! We just had a baby! See here's our wedding picture. We are a happy couple! Look at it! Happy!

(MAUREEN gives him the thumbs up. PHILLIP nods excitedly and concentrates on holding the boom mike just out of frame.)

JOHANN

Ya, okay. Can't give you any more time, bud.

(JOHANN stands up. NICK walks in front of MAUREEN's camera again.)

NICK

We're not done with my survey yet!

(JOHANN pushes NICK onto the floor.)

JOHANN

You have a good day.

(After a moment, breaks character.)

And cut... nice work. Everybody, take a break.

(Helps NICK off the floor.)

PHILLIP

That was good. Damn good!

JOHANN

Did we get it, Maureen?

MAUREEN

I think so. Take a look, but I think we're nearly ready for.... Well, your final sequence.

JOHANN

My final sequence? I thought we would shoot that tomorrow?

MAUREEN

(Whispering.)

After that spat, you might not get another chance past today.

(Loud.)

Your final sequence, Johann. Do it. It's time. And I can't wait.

JOHANN

Yes, I bet you can't.

MAUREEN

My day of deliverance. It's finally arrived.

JOHANN

(Suddenly nervous....)

Well, I need to make sure... Everyone take ten while we look over these takes. If we have the shots, Nick, we'll tackle the final sequence in the Delivery Man video. And I'll need something special from you Nick, during that one.

NICK

Whatever you need, Johann, I'll have it for you.

JOHANN

Yes. You better.

(He smiles strangely and intensely at NICK.)

NICK

What? It'll be like we've been talking about in rehearsal, no worries.

MAUREEN

Time to review those takes, Johann...

(MAUREEN escorts JOHANN and the camera to another part of the set. They re-play shots on a small monitor during the following sequence.)

(HOLLY furiously knits on her toque. NICK glances over; seems poised to approach HOLLY.)

CONNIE

Sit with us, Nick. No need to do any more damage.

NICK

I don't think that's possible, but... sure.

PHILLIP

(Mouths a “Thank You” to CONNIE.)

CONNIE

Need to get off my hooves myself. Ah... oh, yeah, that’s better. Intense day. Enjoy the work though. Feels good to be actually working again. Sure been awhile. And I love watching your moments, Nick. Good stuff.

NICK

Good stuff? Well, maybe. Thanks.

(Uncomfortable silence.)

PHILLIP

Do you want some candy, Nick? I brought some miniature chocolate bars along for a snack. No nuts. If you’re allergic. Just chocolate.

NICK

I’m good.

CONNIE

I’ll take one of those Phil.

PHILLIP

Take three, they’re small.

(Laughs strangely, forced, nervous.)

CONNIE

One is fine. These days Phil, chocolate goes straight to my hind end.

PHILLIP

Have your pick...

NICK

(Hates asking this question, but knows PHIL is expecting him to ask it.)

So Phil... you’ve seen every episode of “Carlito and Emme”... twice?

PHILLIP

Some episodes four or more times. I love episode seventy-three, “The Case of the Missing Tomatillo.”

CONNIE

That’s a funny one.

NICK

You're definitely one of my, one of our, biggest fans.

PHILLIP

Call me Carl! Sorry, I don't say it right. Can you say it? Just once? Sorry, stupid, rude, I shouldn't ask... Why did I do that?

NICK

Not a problem.

(Cheesy, exasperated, sit-comic)

Call me Carl!

HOLLY

(Groans.)

PHILLIP

He said it! Oh he said it! He said it right to me. If mother were here, she would've had her third stroke!

(Laughs almost manically.)

(HOLLY takes out her ear buds and turns on music on her portable device.)

NICK

That's how the world remembers me. Some people are famous for inventions, acts of heroism, scientific discoveries. Me? I'm famous because of a catch phrase. Annabelle!

CONNIE

Yes John?

NICK

Turn on psychoanalysis mode now!

CONNIE

Complying... Complying...

PHILLIP

What was it really like? Sorry again, stupid, I ask too many questions! Eight seasons! I watched you two grow up! The whole world watched you two grow up! What was it like?

NICK

They'll be the best years of my life, most likely. Probably Holly's as well, but don't tell her that. Wish I had realized that at the time. Wish I had saved more of that money. Crazy. Wishes and dreams. I guess I will take one of those candy bars, Phil.

CONNIE

These candy bars are heavenly, Phil. Where'd you get them?

PHILLIP

That gas station on the way here. Who knew a gas station would have such quality chocolate? It's supposed to be good for your libido too. Hubba hubba boom boom boom!

(PHILLIP laughs strangely, manically.)

CONNIE

So... So I just don't know, Nick. Should we be doing this?

NICK

Doing what?

CONNIE

This... play or whatever this is? Plays are supposed to have living, breathing actors on stage, in front of an audience. The machines will be acting for us. It's creepy. Once they get everything recorded, we're done with the project. From the union's standpoint, isn't this unethical?

NICK

It's just work, Connie, take the pay check. Actors aren't obsolete yet.

(MAUREEN and JOHANN return to the group.)

JOHANN

Maureen will just do edits on a few takes, and we'll be wrapped. We need to get more options for one scene with Mary, some more voice bits with Annabelle—

MAUREEN

But other than that, we'll be ready to shoot the final sequence. The murder of Delivery Man Two.

NICK

Death by business tie. I love the anti-corporate metaphor, Johann. Love it!

MAUREEN

Holly. Holly!

HOLLY

(Takes off her earbuds.)

Oh fuck me, sorry. What'd I miss?

JOHANN

I want to shoot one of your scenes again. Part of that post baby monologue.

HOLLY

Absolutely, yes.

MAUREEN

My favorite moment in the whole play. Easily.