

**On-Line**

an act without actors

by

Mark Steven Jensen

Finalist, 2006 STAGE International Script Competition

Finalist, 2004 Metropolis Performing Arts Centre  
New Play Festival

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## PERFORMANCE NOTE

None of these characters appear live; all of their scenes must be filmed before the performance. Only some noise and brief dialogue is performed backstage.

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

JOHN -- A finance officer for a multi-national bank. 30s-40s

MARY -- John's wife, a chain boutiques shop decorator and trainer. 30s-40s.

ANNABELLE -- The voice of JOHN's macro program. Motherly female voice. 40s-60s.

HARRY -- John's boss. 40s-60s.

METEOROLOGIST -- A weather person. 20s to 40s.

NEWSCASTER -- The news anchor. 20s to 40s.

WORKER -- Sewage plant worker. 20s to 60s.

COOK -- The cooking correspondent for the Morning News. 40s.

CARL -- Head of Bank Security. 40s-60s.

DELIVERY MAN ONE -- The online grocery company's deliveryman. 30s-40s.

DELIVERY MAN TWO -- Another grocery deliveryman. 30s-40s

MESSENGER -- A certified corporate messenger. She is in her 20s-40s.

BODYGUARD -- A huge man. 30's to 50s.

## TIME AND PLACE

A studio apartment. The near future. It is the second day of June.

## DEVELOPMENT HISTORY

### FIRST PUBLIC READING

ON-LINE was first performed during an informal public reading of new plays presented by Theatre in My Basement. Chris Danowski directed the reading. The performance occurred in February, 2001.

### NON-PERFORMANCE WORKSHOP

ON-LINE was next developed through a non-performance workshop at the Playwrights' Center of Minneapolis. Barbara Kingsley, Alayne Hopkins, Steve Lewis, and Joe Scrimshaw performed the roles. Allison Moore was the dramaturg. Peter Rothstein was the director. The workshop took place on Dec. 4, 2004.

### EXPERIMENTAL WORKSHOP

ON-LINE was later used during an experimental workshop co-sponsored by the Ensemble Studio Theatre (through a grant from the Sloan Foundation) and the Playwrights' Center of Minneapolis. The purpose of the workshop was to develop a companion play, OFF-LINE, to the original 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.

(SETTING: The interior of a cramped studio apartment.)

(AT RISE: Screen savers are active on the computer monitors.)

(As the performance begins, there should be a couple minutes of silence. The audience can then observe the apartment.)

(The shelves are filled with computer equipment. Five monitors, all of them turned on, are placed in various places throughout the room.)

(SCREEN 1 presides over a messy desk, a screen saver image moving across its face.)

(SCREEN 2 sits near the phone. This screen says "THREE MESSAGES FOR YOU, JOHN.")

(SCREEN 3 is a black and white monitor mounted near the main door. This screen is the monitor for the security camera; on its face is a flickering image of a long, empty hallway lined with closed doors; the hallway stretches off into infinity.)

(SCREEN 4, the largest screen, is on the desk. the words "SLEEP MODE" move across its face. A microphone has been placed in front of this screen's speakers.)

(SCREEN 5 is a television.)

(Thick text books, among them programming and economics books, either lie open on top of the counters or are stacked neatly on the shelves.)

(An aquarium bubbles, but its water is murky. Dead fish float upside down on top of the water.)

(Pictures of a young woman, MARY, are placed reverently in a shrine. In some of the pictures, a man, JOHN, stands next to MARY. There is a picture of them cutting a wedding cake.)

(Three college diplomas.)

(A golf trophy.)

(A treadmill and weight set are placed one corner of the room, next to the dresser.)

(Clock radio on the dresser.)

(The small bed is neatly made. Throw pillows are on it.)

(On the floor are piles of unwashed clothes, mostly shorts and athletic clothes.)

(A stacked washer and a dryer are inside a closet. The washer has a sizable dent on its front face. Laundry soap, dryer sheets.)

(An open door reveals a small bathroom--complete with a shower, sink, and a toilet.)

(A small Christmas tree has flashing lights, but half of the strings are burnt out.)

(A microwave.)

(A stove and oven.)

(A sink surrounded by dirty dishes. Mold is growing on the dishes.)

(A refrigerator. Computer printed pictures are on the refrigerator. Many of them show MARY in exotic locations; several pictures show MARY in Siberia in the winter.)

(A video 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.)

(Some large spots of dried blood are on the carpet; these spots are near the camera.)

(The main door has three deadbolts; the deadbolts are not latched.)

(A large slot is inset into the wall near the door.)

(Directly below this slot is a pile of plastic grocery bags – food spills out of them. The perishables on top of this pile are fresh, but the perishables living below are in various degrees of decay – blackened grapes, tomatoes, and bananas. Several unopened quarts of milk are in this pile.)

(Dust everywhere.)

(A ceiling fan. Hanging from it is a dried corpse; it apparently has been hanging there for several months. It faces the monitors as if watching them. Dressed in comfortable athletic clothes, the corpse's face is hidden by the hood from its sweatshirt. Beneath the corpse is a tipped stool.)

(SCREEN 1 suddenly shows a digital readout of the time, 7:01 am. Displayed below this readout are the flashing words, "WAKE UP, JOHN!" ANNABELLE, the computer, speaks.)

ANNABELLE (VOICE ONLY)

(Motherly.)

Good morning John. It is time to wake up. Please do so now.

(Silence.)

Today's date is Monday, June the second. The outside temperature is sixty-two degrees with a high predicted to be in the upper eighties. I shall regulate the inside temperature to sixty-eight degrees by activating the air conditioning. This will create a debit of four dollars and seventy-two cents.

(Silence.)

You have not indicated that you are out of bed. Please wake up, John. Today is a workday, so you cannot sleep in.

(Silence.)

Remember John, I have been programmed to keep nagging until you indicate that you are out of bed.

(Silence.)

During the night you received three phone calls. One from...

JOHN (VOICE ONLY)

FedNet Bank, Incorporated.

ANNABELLE (VOICE ONLY)

And--

MARY (VOICE ONLY)

(Hammy performance.)

Your hunny bunny, Mary.

MARY (VOICE ONLY) (CONT.)  
(Laughs)

That was terrible, let me do it over.

JOHN (VOICE ONLY)

I'm saving it!

MARY (VOICE ONLY)

John, no—

(A clicking sound.)

ANNABELLE (VOICE ONLY)

And--

JOHN (VOICE ONLY)

Caller ID not available.

(Silence.)

ANNABELLE (VOICE ONLY)

You have ten seconds to wake up before I instigate louder measures. John, wake up.

(A ten second countdown appears on SCREEN 1.)

ANNABELLE (VOICE ONLY)

The ten seconds have launched.

(Pause.)

Five seconds remain.

(Pause.)

Louder measures activated.

(SCREEN 5 turns on to a local morning show. A METEOROLOGIST sits at a desk.)

METEOROLOGIST

The current temperature is sixty-two degrees, but we will probably reach the upper eighties by mid-afternoon. We also have a twenty percent chance for rain, but even if it does hit us, we should only see a trace. A beautiful, enjoyable summer day.

(The image cuts to the METEOROLOGIST and the NEWSCASTER.)

NEWSCASTER

Great day to break out that canoe!

METEOROLOGIST

We should have perfect weather through the week.

NEWSCASTER

It's always nice to hear good news from you.

METEOROLOGIST

I do what I can, when I can.

NEWSCASTER

You certainly do.

(They laugh contritely. SCREEN FIVE cuts to the  
NEWSCASTER.)

NEWSCASTER(CONT.)

In local news today, an apparent shooting spree has left five people dead and four wounded at Sal's, a local bar and grill. The gunman entered the restaurant last night and shot several victims before—

(Simultaneous dialogue.)

NEWSCASTER(CONT.)

--turning the gun on himself. Police are investigating. In other local news, a flock of ducks is doing fine after an ordeal at a waste treatment facility. Somehow the ducks wiggled their way into the plant and started to swim in one of the vats. Workers ran out to a local pet store to get some nets to remove them from their toxic swim.

WORKER

I just looked over and I said, hey Barker, those look like ducks! And he said, we better get them outta that vat. So, a bunch of us guys pooled some money together and we bought these nets, see here-

ANNABELLE (VOICE ONLY)

John, you still have not indicated that you are up. Remember John, you programmed me to do more drastic measures in case you refuse to get out of bed.

(Pause.)

More drastic measures will be activated in ten seconds.

(Pause.)

Five seconds remain.

(Pause.)

Louder measures activated.

(A dissident mix of music blasts. Scenes of explosions, air battles, ground battles, car chases,



and giant monsters on both SCREEN 5 and SCREEN 1.)

(SCREEN 4 exits sleep mode. It says, "DECIBEL LEVEL REACHED. JOHN MACRO LOGON ACTIVATED." JOHN appears, seated, in suit and tie, with the idyllic beach scene shown behind him.)

JOHN

Annabelle!

(His image disappears and the words, "LOGON AWAITING VERBAL INPUT" are shown on SCREEN 4.)

(The noise stops, and the word "MUTE" displays over SCREENS 1 and 5.)

ANNABELLE (VOICE ONLY)

Are you up, John?

(SCREEN 4 now says the words "PROCESSING INPUT." Soon after, the screen displays the words "DONE." JOHN appears on SCREEN 4 again.)

JOHN

Yes, Annabelle, I am awake.

ANNABELLE (VOICE ONLY)

Enter your password.

(Again, SCREEN 4 now says the words "PROCESSING INPUT." Soon it displays the words "DONE." JOHN appears.)

JOHN

I still live. Activate John Macro.

ANNABELLE (VOICE ONLY)

Password verified. Good morning, John. I will start warming your coffee and egg bake.

(The microwave oven turns on. A mug is inside the microwave.)

(The conventional oven also clicks on; a scorched pan is seen inside.)

(JOHN once again disappears from SCREEN 4, replaced by the words “JOHN MACRO ON. AWAITING ANNABELLE INPUT. SCREEN 1 has “JOHN WAKE UP SEQUENCE, PHASE THREE.)

ANNABELLE (VOICE ONLY)

Your breakfast is warming. It is time for your exercises, John. Do you want a light, normal, or aerobic workout?

(SCREEN 4: JOHN appears.)

JOHN

Aerobic.

(SCREEN 4: “JOHN MACRO ON. AWAITING ANNABELLE INPUT.)

ANNABELLE (VOICE ONLY)

Be sure to warm up thoroughly. The company will not be pleased if they have to send the on-call physician back here again for another sprain. She was not very friendly towards you, John, remember. Careful stretching that left knee.

(SCREEN 4: JOHN appears.)

JOHN

I've finished my warm-up, Annabelle.

ANNABELLE (VOICE ONLY)

Launching.

(The treadmill turns on.)

(SCREEN 4: JOHN disappears, replaced by the “Macro Waiting” graphic.)

(The machines continue running for some time. The treadmill runs, the microwave heats up the mug, and the conventional oven warms the pan.)

(The microwave beeps and shuts off.)

ANNABELLE (VOICE ONLY)

Your coffee is now quite hot. It will be at your favorite temperature when you finish your workout.

(SCREEN 4: JOHN appears.)

JOHN

Any phone messages, Annabelle?

ANNABELLE (VOICE ONLY)

Three.

JOHN

Play them please.

ANNABELLE (VOICE ONLY)

Launching.

(JOHN disappears, replaced by the “Macro Waiting” graphic. SCREEN 2’s display changes to “RETRIEVING MESSAGES.”)

ANNABELLE (VOICE ONLY)

Message one.

(A volume bar appears on SCREEN 2, turning up the sound above the grind of the treadmill.)

(A middle-aged man, HARRY, frowns into the camera. He is surrounded by the walls of a windowless office.)

HARRY

Don’t you ever answer your phone? Heck, it’s only seven-thirty in the evening, you still must be awake. Never mind. Those accounts you finished yesterday were excellent. Genius of you to give them more than what they asked at a lower interest rate. Like you said in your email, we make the same money and we undercut the competition. Amazing. Well, I guess that is why you do what you do. Our division should lead the company again for another quarter.

(Pause.)

Still not answering your phone, huh? We’ve turned you into a hermit. I’ve got some new accounts for you to look over. Call me when you’re done. And... I guess that’s it.

(HARRY’s image disappears.)

ANNABELLE (VOICE ONLY)

Downloading files.

(SCREEN 1 lists the files, one by one, as they download. The words “DOWNLOADING VOR BIOTECHNOLOGIES ACCOUNT... DONE. DOWNLOADING THE SPEEGEL GROUP ACCOUNT...DONE. DOWNLOADING

HARMON TOOL AND DIE  
ACCOUNT...DONE.”)

ANNABELLE (VOICE ONLY)

Files download complete.

(Pause.)

Message two.

(MARY appears on SCREEN 2; she is framed by the walls of a motel room. She wears a business suit.)

MARY

Sorry to call when you're sleeping John. This time zone difference is killing us. Thank God for vmail.

(Pause.)

I know we talked about, for sure, this time, in June. But I just can't get away right now, the opportunities out here are so much better than predicted. I leave tomorrow to open two new stores. It's unbelievable how well the Siberians love our line of bathing soaps and towels.

(Pause.)

Our... project is still negative. Today the timing is perfect. I'll call before I catch my night flight so we can, y'know, together. For luck.

(Pause.)

I will call John, before I leave, okay? What am I saying, this is driving you as crazy as it does me. We need to speak in person for once. Talk to you in a couple hours.

(MARY reaches and shuts off a button. Her image disappears.)

ANNABELLE (VOICE ONLY)

Message three.

(CARL appears. His office is lined with surveillance screens.)

CARL

Security here. Say, I just reviewed yur 12-69 here ta spend an afternoon at the museum, and I gotta tell ya buddy, ya do that at yur own risk. I can't spare any bodyguards with all our needs here at the tower and the executives out on junkets. I arrange security, buddy, not funerals. Wish I could help, but we got other priorities. Stay at home. You wanna see a museum, go ta some museum web sites and check out their videos.

(He checks his monitor.)

Oh, and, ah, it says here ya are scheduled to receive a bonus gift. "Congratulations on Barton Waste Management account." Comes from the board of directors. I'll have one of my delivery people bring it by today. She's certified.

(He reviews some records on his monitor.)

CARL (CONT.)

And stop sending these 12-69s. You're like a clock, buddy, you keep asking to go to this museum every three weeks. Can it. Until these nuts get caught, you stay in secure housing.

(CARL disappears.)

ANNABELLE (VOICE ONLY)

There are no further messages. Do you wish to save or delete any of these messages?

(JOHN appears on SCREEN 4.)

JOHN

Delete all messages.

(The words DELETING PHONE MESSAGES appear along with a progress bar.)

ANNABELLE (VOICE ONLY)

All messages deleted.

(The treadmill runs on.)

(SCREEN 5 returns to the news broadcast; this screen's volume bar also rises above the din of the treadmill.)

NEWSCASTER

--and that is this morning's headlines. Let's go to Sam for the latest on the weather.

METEOROLOGIST

We can't ask for a better day. This morning will be the lowest temperature we will have, with a range in the mid sixties. Look for a high in the mid eighties with a trace amount of rainfall possible as the day goes on. Nothing to worry about, though. A picture perfect day ahead. Now back to Janine who's got something cooking for us in the kitchen.

(SCREEN 5: The NEWSCASTER and a COOK stand in a studio kitchen.)

NEWSCASTER

I'm in the Morning News kitchen with our very own Channel Seven chef, Rebecca Parea. Good morning Rebecca.

COOK

Good Morning Janine.

NEWSCASTER

So what are you cooking for us today?