

WILL HOUSE STAIRS DARK

By

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JOSEPH

I'm just a vessel. For something bigger than myself. Taylor, you'll be the lead.

TAYLOR

Lots of lines, I hope. Hahaha! Actor question. Terrible. It'll be great to get back on the boards, uh, screens! Redemption and all that. Had a rough go of it lately. Critics living up to their names! Hahaha! Nice to get something simple I can knock out of the park.

JOSEPH

Jenny, you'll be the maid.

JENNY

(affecting British accent)

Woe is me, always the maid! Just kidding. The maids have the best lines. And lots of romance. It's been a while.

JOSEPH

No one's had good lines in a while.

JENNY

I meant romance.

JOSEPH AND TAYLOR

(together)

Don't worry Jenny, when all this is over we'll get back into the swing of...

(Pause.)

JENNY

Oh shoot.

(Long, terrible silence.)

JOSEPH

Let's pretend that didn't happen.

TAYLOR

For the play.

JOSEPH
For the play.

(Pause.)

Toni of course directing and, given our budget, designing the show too. When you're directing make sure you speak loudly to the bad actors and quietly to the good ones. Not that there's any of those here.

TAYLOR
Any of those which? Bad or good?

JOSEPH
I write in pencil.

TAYLOR
I don't—

TONI
Let's get rolling! Title. "The Will in the House with the Stairs that are Dark." By Joseph Patrick. Nicely done. Titles are hard to come up with.

JOSEPH
It just flowed.

TONI
"The play opens in a drawing room." A drawing room comedy! Thank God! Something light! Just what the world could use right now!

JOSEPH
No. It's a drawing comedy.

TONI
You mean drawing room comedy.

JOSEPH

I don't know what that is. The play is about people who draw. That's why they're in a drawing *room*. Keep up Toni. I know we're all struggling these days, but my God.

TONI

Okay. Do over. "Will House Stairs Dark. The play opens in a drawing *room*. The room smells of fire and cinnamon. It smells of sencha tea and deciduous forest. It smells like your grandmother's cologne on the first day of her second marriage."

(Pause.)

TONI

Just a design question, Joseph. Given the platform we're using, and the lack of actual smelling capabilities by the audience...

JOSEPH

Is there a problem here Toni?

TONI

No! Of course not!

JOSEPH

Good.

TONI

No problem at all! So: "Morning light comes through the high bay windows. It is yellow like the lingering music of an old flute that's never been played. And then shifting to purple. Then shifting to violet, then back to purple, but different than the first kind of purple. Design note..."

JOSEPH

Here you go Toni.

TONI

"...designer should be able to illustrate all these effects with papier mache, cray-pas and a high-end fog machine."

JOSEPH

You got this Toni. I believe in you.

TONI

“A winding cherry wood staircase runs down the middle of the great room. The stairs are caught up in a diffuse play of shadows and gun smoke.”

(Pause.)

TONI

Again, a Zoom-specific question—

(JOSEPH impatiently waves TONI on. SHE takes a deep breath and obliges.)

TONI

“The stairs look like a tornado, but a gentle one. A tornado that might damage a two-story house but never a ranch. The tree has to be authentic cherry wood, or the audience won’t buy it. It is approximately four years old, its trunk scarred but not viciously, the tree giving off a sad air as a child who’s had her favorite toy taken away at a New Orleans funeral march.”

(Pause.)

TONI

Joseph, I love the concept. I’m just not sure if I can...

JOSEPH

Not sure if you can...what? I can take always take this play somewhere else.

TONI

No, no! We can pull this off. No problem.

JOSEPH

Wonderful.

TONI

Onward. “Enter Patrick—

JOSEPH

“Onward.” Does it say onward in there?

TONI

No, that was me. Directing. “Onward!”

JOSEPH

Good, because I wouldn’t use “onward” in a play. People don’t actually say that. “Onward.” Except you I guess.

TONI

Okay. Onwa... I mean, Here we go!: “Enter Patrick McFarquhareyeth...something, more syllables, something...no one can really pronounce his name so we don’t even write it all out because what’s the point.”

JENNY

Is that all in the stage notes?

JOSEPH

Can we refrain people from the nattering questions! Yes it is in the notes!

TONI

“He is tall, with black hair swept up in a pompadour, but a pompadour from late 1956, not ’57. He is rosy-cheeked and a bit plump, though he loses fourteen pounds by the end of the play.”

TAYLOR

(nervously)

That’s interesting.

TONI

Joseph, I’m just wondering about the necessity of all these specific notes.

JOSEPH

For the love of God! This is how real playwrighters write!

TONI

No, of course. Absolutely. So. “He has one sideburn four centimeters longer than the other one. This is indicative of his character in an infuriatingly vague way, though the actor should be able to figure it out or, I mean, what the hell? His lips are frozen in a perpetual half-sneer...but then thinking better of it and smiling...a little...because, playing the long game, if he fakes being nice, he will get written more generously into his father’s will.”

JENNY

A will! That’ll keep the audience engaged.

TAYLOR

To a tee, eh? There won’t be any critics watching, right?

JOSEPH

There’s not really a will.

JENNY

Clever. The plot thickens. There’s not a will!

JOSEPH

There’s not a will because this is a play and nothing is real except in my mind, which is a truly fascinating place to live.

JENNY

Oh, of course. I know that. I was just....didn’t we have sweet times together, Joey?

JOSEPH

Again, the questions! And yes, at least three of the most career-making or breaking critics in town said they’d be watching.

TAYLOR

No problem! No problem at all!

TONI

“Patrick’s nose is set firmly on his face and it does not move.”

(TAYLOR laughs, relieved.)

TAYLOR

Should be easy enough to pull off!

TONI

“Not even his nostril wings move, because he barely seems to breathe the entire duration of the play...”

TAYLOR

Jesus Christ!

(Pause.)

Sorry. Didn't mean for you to hear that. I think I should mute myself for a moment.

(HIS mic goes on mute.)

TONI

“...because he doesn't want to seem like he is dominating the room with all sorts of facial activity and annoying everyone and, in the long run, getting written out of the will. He barely breathes even when he is engaged in a wild knife fight, or screaming at his ex-fiancee for taking his mother's side in the disbursement of the will.”

JENNY

Which doesn't exist.

JOSEPH

It exists. It's just not there.

JENNY

What are you Jean-Paul Sartre?

JOSEPH

I never drink the stuff.

TONI

Onward.

JOSEPH

Excuse me?

TONI

We continue! "...disbursement of the will which in the end he shall not get a lot of money from. Or actually any money from. Thus the yelling and the knife fight and six people, four plants and two goats dead. Which, if you didn't want to know how the play ended until the actual end, well now you know and are disappointed. Sorry."

JENNY

That's all in there too?

JOE

Am I working with amateurs here? Of course it's in there!

JENNY

Sorry. Sorry. Sorry! Oh, Joseph, Taylor is on mute, so he can't hear us. Quickly. You know you're the only one for me Joey. I got in over my head with Taylor—

JOSEPH

Jenny—

JENNY

—but he is really just a sad excuse for a man.

JOSEPH

Jenny—

JENNY

I mean really boring! If had a dollar for every minute I almost fell asleep in the middle of a date, I'd be up 70 bucks every night.

JOSEPH

Jenny, just because he's on mute doesn't mean he can't hear us.

(TAYLOR's mic turns back on.)

TAYLOR

Hi Jenny.

JENNY

Oh, hi Taylor.

(Silence.)

JOSEPH

For the sake of the play let's pretend...

TAYLOR

For the sake of the play...

JENNY

The work.

JOSEPH

It's about the work.

TONI

We sally forth. "McFarquharayeth etc etc looks at people in a way that makes them feel a cold chill of one who has seen either the devil himself or the devil's half brother on his father's side, a vision which generates in them an alluring sense of warmth as one approaching a cornered badger might feel that seems especially cute and will kill you. The furrows on his forehead speak of a lifetime of mourning over a smooth-cheeked younger brother who fell in the battlefield at the Somme, or the leaving of a half-eaten cheese sandwich on a train platform in Pittsburgh when he was 12—whichever befits his mood in the moment. His fingers are that of a man who appears to have played the piano his entire life but actually played the oboe. His eyes have seen more dysfunctional cricket teams than he cares to admit. His ears are capricious. The actor should be able to convey all of this within the first 20 seconds of appearing on stage, or the play is ruined. Enter the maid."

TAYLOR

I'm out! That's it. I am out!

JOSEPH

Taylor, you can do this! You went to Julliard, right?

TAYLOR

Oh for the love of—Julie’s yard! How many times do I have to—We did plays in Julie Wellie’s backyard when I was nine. That’s where I got all my training. People always think I’m saying Julliard. Although, it has gotten me a lot of work.

JOSEPH

Good enough for me

TONI

“Enter the maid. She seems nice.”

JENNY

That’s it? The maid seems nice?

JOSEPH

Yes.

JENNY

Oh.

JOSEPH

Not enough of an acting challenge? Think you can pull off something more?

JENNY

Well...

JOSEPH

Okay, “She wears a maid outfit and seems nice.” See if you can sell that one.

JENNY

Oh, thank you. More business for me to do. I can fuss with it, roll up the sleeves.

JOSEPH

You should keep your acting secrets to yourself.

TONI

Joseph. No worries, no worries at all, but I've only got a basic Zoom account. I'm not sure I can pull all this off.

JOSEPH

You can upgrade to the one where people log on and then actually show up in your living room. Fully masked.

(HE produces a sandwich onscreen and takes a bite.)

Sorry, I shouldn't eat in front of everyone. I'll just shut off for a second.

(HIS camera turns off.)

JENNY

Taylor, his camera is off. Quickly: I just wanted you to know I was saying all of that to Joseph just to throw him off the scent. He is just a pathetic little creature! You know you're the only man for me.

TAYLOR

Jenny, just because his camera is off...

JENNY

...doesn't mean he can't see and hear me. Dammit! I am just not getting this platform!

(JOSEPH turns on his camera.)

JOSEPH

For the work.

TAYLOR

The play.

JENNY

The art.

TONI

The money. We migrate ahead.

(Continues with stage directions.)

“The maid speaks with a combination of wry plaintiveness and reckless lassitude, trilling her q’s and exhaling on all diphthongs. Her cancer-ridden mother, who we never see or even hear about, is always at the forefront of her mind, a fact absolutely clear to the audience...”

(TONI stops.)

TONI

Joseph, I’m sorry. You’re great. Truly. And this. This is just..really something. But I don’t think we can do it. It’s just too much for the actors to pull off. They’re going to tie themselves in knots trying to carry out all these character notes, let alone the set descriptions and stage directions. It’ll make us look like fools, which is the last thing we need right now. I’m sorry.

JOSEPH

I’ll pay you.

TONI

What?

JOSEPH

I’ll pay you to put it on.

TONI

Really?

JOSEPH

Five thousand. I’ll pay you five thousand dollars.

TONI

You’re serious?

JOSEPH

Yes. I just want someone to say my words. In front of other people. Who will listen.

(Pause.)

People don't usually listen to me.

TONI

They don't?

JOSEPH

No.

(Long pause.)

TONI

Five thousand?

(JOSEPH nods. Pause. TONI slowly starts reading as lights go slowly down.)

TONI

"...a fact absolutely clear to the audience as she cleans the cherrywood with a rag made of horsehair, Naugahyde and fairy dust, but from fairies who never learned to fly and are probably alcoholic. The maid with great concupiscence picks up a..."

(Black)

End of Play