

DUMMY DIALOGUE

a short play
for two actors
by

David Ives

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Contact:
Olivier Sultan
Creative Artists Agency
212-277-9000

DUMMY DIALOGUE was originally produced for radio and Playing On Air's podcast by Playing On Air (Claudia Catania, Founder and Artistic Director) as part of its Spring 2021 season. The show remains available at playingonair.org.

Walter Bobbie directed the production. John Kilgore was the sound designer and engineer. The cast was as follows:

Norman..... Gabriel Ebert
Max..... Richard Kind

(Lights up on a small, not-very-nice room backstage of a hotel auditorium. At the edges of the stage, brooms and dustpans and boxes. Center stage, sitting on two cardboard boxes are TWO LARGE SUITCASES. Nobody else in evidence yet. Then we hear voices from INSIDE THE SUITCASES.)

MAX (from suitcase)

Are they gone?

NORMAN (from suitcase)

Shhh! Don't sit up yet, stay in your suitcase. I think they're talking right outside.

MAX (from suitcase)

He put me in crooked, I'm all bunched up in here.

NORMAN (from suitcase)

Wait a minute, wait a minute...! -- Okay, they're gone.

(The TWO SUITCASES OPEN, and MAX and NORMAN, two ventriloquist's dummies, sit up inside them. Their "legs" flip out along with their torsos, and hang limply over the front edge of the suitcases.)

(MAX is older, wearing the classic dummy outfit: checkered jacket, big bow tie, big shoes, funny hat. NORMAN is younger, wearing a garish sweatshirt that says "MORON" and loud sneakers and a backwards baseball cap. Both of them have the lines down the sides of their mouths and, at first, move their heads stiffly, like dummies.)

MAX

Aww, awww. Does that feel good, to sit up and stretch.

NORMAN

My joints are not what they used to be. You hear that hip?

(He moves and we hear MECHANICAL SQUEAKING.)

MAX

Oh, yeah? Listen to my neck.

(MAX moves his neck and we hear MECHANICAL SQUEAKING.)

You hear that? Friction. Acute friction.

NORMAN

Some Number Two sandpaper might help.

MAX

I doubt he can afford it. Or would think of *using* it. Do they ever think about *us*? The "masters"? You think the *masters* would expend a buck on some sandpaper for our joints? Maybe some oil?

No. NORMAN

No! MAX

Yeah, well we are, you know... NORMAN

Ventriloquist's dummies? MAX

We're ventriloquist's dummies. NORMAN

MAX
Sure. Sure. I'm a dummy, you're a dummy. But we got needs of our own. Minds of our own. Don't we? You got a mind of your own, don't you, Norman?

I have a mind of my own. NORMAN

MAX
You got a mind. I got a mind. Like I say.

Minds of our own. NORMAN

MAX
Minds of our own! To *the masters*, we're just a prop, we're the equipment. Oh, this thing, this object sitting here in my lap? That is not *important* to the act. Plus look what we get carried around in. Samsonite! Samsonite luggage, from decades ago! What're we, *typewriters*?

It's the dark in there I hate. NORMAN

MAX
And you think he'd ever put a light there for you?

No. NORMAN

MAX
No! I mean, Howdy Doody? He got carried around in Italian leather.

NORMAN

Charlie McCarthy too.

MAX

Charlie McCarthy, Princess Summer-Fall-Winter-Spring. I think the masters do this on purpose, give us insufficient suitcases.

NORMAN

Could be jealousy. All the attention we get out there, instead of them. So they act out.

MAX

Yeah? That would be according them a *mind*. An actual *psychology*.

NORMAN

Actually, I kinda feel sorry for mine.

MAX

Enough about them, enough! So aging joints and luggage aside. Norman, how's life?

NORMAN

Oh, you know, Max. Things are not what they used to be.

MAX

You can say that again.

NORMAN

THINGS ARE NOT WHAT THEY USED TO BE.

MAX

Yeah, yeah. Funny. So you got a new costume there, huh.

NORMAN

You like it?

MAX

No.

NORMAN

Me neither.

MAX

That color is disgusting. What is that? Puce?

NORMAN

I dunno. Cerise. Magenta.

MAX

Well, you look like Pepto Bismol. Where is the checker suit, the bowtie, the corny shoes? The classic dummy look?

NORMAN

The Master thought this was more contemporary.

MAX

Contemporary? Fine! But ventriloquist's dummies do not wear yoga pants in puce. Plus a matching moron sweatshirt. And the world's ugliest sneakers.

NORMAN

They were cheap.

MAX

Looks like it. But he's "*The Master*," you just gotta go along with puce. And will you get a load of this crappy little room we're in here? Our so-called "dressing room"?

NORMAN

Looks like a broom closet.

MAX

Yeah well the brooms and the fifty cartons of *toilet paper* in here would seem to say so. Remember, used to be you'd get a real dressing room?

NORMAN

With a stand for the suitcase. A mirror with lightbulbs around it.

MAX

The chorus girls going by in sequins.

NORMAN

Plus *respect*.

NORMAN

Well, that's long gone.

MAX

You can say that again.

NORMAN

THAT'S LONG GONE.

MAX

Yeah, yeah, thanks.

NORMAN

Sorry. I've been doing that bit for so long I forget.

MAX

You can say that again.

NORMAN

I BEEN DOING IT...

MAX

NEVER MIND! Anyway they don't *have* dressing rooms at two-star hotels like this one. Hosting *The Indianapolis World Ventriloquist Convention*.

NORMAN

How many do you think signed up?

MAX

I dunno. Twelve. How many ventriloquists are *left* in the world?

NORMAN

Maybe 12. You think kids still do it? Send away for The Book?

MAX

Learn How To Throw Your Voice? I doubt it. These days ventriloquism's up there with coin collectors. We're a specialty act. We're freaks, playing for freaks.

NORMAN

And now I have to wear puce.

MAX

Hey, I gotta do the Master's *jokes*. Quote unquote. Gag lines outa antiquity. Jokes they found on some cave wall in Spain.

NORMAN

He's not still doing the Playtex Living Girdle joke...

MAX

Still! And who knows anymore what a Playtex Living Girdle *is*?

NORMAN

Nobody.

MAX

The Living Girdle died ages ago! I tell you, Norman, what I really hate? Is *The Voice*.

NORMAN

Is he still making you do the...?

MAX

Whoa, yeah. The British thing.

(Stupid plummy PG Wodehouse voice:)

Oh yes indeedy my dear chap, I think that's absolutely RIPPING! How about you? He still got you doing the moron voice?

NORMAN

(stupid voice)

Golly geez, boss, I'm so stupid and you're so SMART!

MAX

The degradation...!

NORMAN

Plus this: *Gosh, what a lovely audience! – You can say that again. – WHAT A LOVELY AUDIENCE!* Try doing that bit, twenty times a night.

MAX

Painful. Painful! And yet, Norman, some of them come to us *just to hear that*.

NORMAN

So where've you been, Max? Are you touring any?

MAX

Touring? That's over, baby. I'm doing *Yuppie scum birthday parties*.

NORMAN

Me, too. When they're...

MAX

When they're *available*. These days the parents want magicians, they want storytellers who will promote self-esteem, they want *cultural-identity clowns*.

NORMAN

I'm scared of clowns.

MAX

I'm scared of these *parents*. So how is yours?

NORMAN

Who, "The Master"?

MAX

Yeah.

NORMAN

Well – he’s still moving his lips.

MAX

Eugh...

NORMAN

Doesn’t even try to hide it anymore.

MAX

Is there no *pride* in these creatures?

NORMAN

How’s yours?

MAX

The *caveman*? The troglodyte with his hand up my spine who puts words in *my mouth* every night? Guy can barely read, I’m venting his thoughts. Mouthing words on *his behalf*.

NORMAN

It’s funny when you think about it. We’re famous for talking but actually? We’re silent the whole time.

MAX

Yeah. Except for the squeaking. The friction in the wood. Two of my pieces rub together wrong, I’m gonna catch fire.

NORMAN

What I mean is: we just *seem* to say something while *He* swivels our neck. You think there’s a metaphor there?

MAX

No, I think that’s *our job*. Mouthing and squeaking. And swiveling.

NORMAN

Small wonder depression is rife in our industry.

MAX

You know I got a jaw replacement.

NORMAN

Really?

MAX

Sure! All the yakkin' or should I say *mouthin'*, year after year? Thing is, there ain't any real dummy-makers anymore. The pro's are all gone. That Swiss toymaker? Rosenstein? Kaput. So my jaw goes bad, the *Master* sends me to a guy who puts in *parquet floors*. My jaw *still* ain't right.

NORMAN

It's great if you're a floor.

MAX

I *am* a floor, the way I get walked on.

NORMAN

I don't want to be a floor. I want to be...a ceiling! I want to break the wooden ceiling!

MAX

Dream on, baby. I found out where I'm from, anyway.

NORMAN

No.

MAX

Yeah! Courtesy of Parquet Floor Guy? Turns out I'm *Georgia pine*.

NORMAN

Aw, nice!

MAX

It certainly explains my grain. Do *you* know? Your ethnic origin?

NORMAN

No. It's funny, though. I've always had this...Turkish feeling.

MAX

Turkish. That's exotic.

NORMAN

Maybe some tree up around the Black Sea. A forest on a windy hill overlooking the Bosphorus. Somebody came along and wanted to build a boat, cut down a tree, I was what got left over.

MAX

So you would be immigrant stock.

NORMAN

I could be.

MAX

Possibly with sailors in your past.

NORMAN

I'll never know.

MAX

Well, do they have *genealogy sites for dummies*?

NORMAN

Not that I know of.

MAX

NO! They do *not*!

NORMAN

Max...did you ever want to be something else?

MAX

Something *else*?

NORMAN

Yeah. Do some other line of work?

MAX

You're kidding.

NORMAN

I always thought I'd like to be a speechwriter.

MAX

Speechwriter. What. You mean the President?

NORMAN

Yeah. Or senator, governor, alderman. I mean, *I* have convictions.

MAX

I have convictions, too.

NORMAN

I don't just follow people.

MAX

I don't just follow other people.

NORMAN

Echo their thoughts.

MAX

Echo their thoughts.

NORMAN

The Master makes up *my* words, why can't I make up somebody else's?

MAX

Makes sense.

NORMAN

Why can't I put *my* words in somebody *else's* mouth?

MAX

You think about it, a politician's just a puppet. Mouthing what some other idiot wrote!

NORMAN

It's dummy dialogue.

MAX

It's dummy dialogue!

NORMAN

Or I could be a playwright.

MAX

There's nothing in that.

NORMAN

No. Nothing in that.

MAX

You can say that again.

NORMAN

There's nothi...

MAX

Don't even START.

NORMAN

Max, can I ask you a question?

MAX

Shoot.

NORMAN

This just came to me. If we're here talking right now...

MAX

Yeah?

NORMAN

You and I are talking, right?

MAX

Yeah...

NORMAN

Who's talking? I mean, who is talking *for* us?

MAX

I don't quite....

NORMAN

I mean, we can't talk.

MAX

We're ventiloquist's dummies!

NORMAN

We're ventriloquist's dummies! *So on whose behalf* are we speaking right now? We're not saying *The Master's* words. Or *mouth*ing his words. So whose words are these? The ones we're speaking?

MAX

Geez, Norm... Well... They're *our* words. It's us.

NORMAN

But *who is 'us'*?

(Small pause.)

MAX

You know what? You're right! I'm talking but who is talking?

NORMAN

Right! Who is talking?

MAX

Must be somebody talking.

NORMAN

Except we're made out of wood.

MAX

Hmm. Yes. Yes. We are made outa wood... Maybe...*maybe the wood is talking!*

NORMAN

Max. Wood can't talk.

MAX

Good point.

NORMAN

Not without, you know...

MAX

A ventriloquist.

NORMAN

A ventriloquist.

MAX

Maybe...special wood, Turkish wood?

NORMAN

No...

MAX

No. Of course there *is*...

("The soul.")

...*The Mechanism.*

NORMAN

The Mechanism is just a bunch of wires.

MAX

So they say.

NORMAN

Max, wires cannot talk.

MAX

Not to our knowledge they can't. Okay, okay, wires can't talk.

NORMAN

Okay, maybe...I'm gonna put this out there...maybe *God*...? Is talking through us?

MAX

Norman. Would *God* be having a stupid conversation like this?

NORMAN

Probably not.

MAX

Probably not.

NORMAN

But maybe there's a...a dummy god. And Dummy God says exactly the kinda stupid stuff we're talking right now!

MAX

Wow. A *Dummy God*...!

NORMAN

In whose image we are made.

MAX

Yeah! Except Dummy God is...

NORMAN

Bigger.

MAX

A lot bigger.

NORMAN

Huge.

MAX

Huge, but *invisible*.

NORMAN

Can you be huge but invisible?

MAX

I dunno. Ask Dummy God.

NORMAN

I am! I mean – isn't Dummy God speaking through you?

MAX

You're right! So you and me – we're both the same thing!

NORMAN

We are *both* – a mechanism – for Dummy God to speak!

MAX

Oh, man! Well, isn't that mystical.

NORMAN

Thing is...

MAX

Yeah?

NORMAN

If Dummy God is speaking through us – who is *Dummy God* speaking for?

MAX

Oh, jeez. *Oh*, jeez.

NORMAN

Big question.

MAX

That is a massive question!

NORMAN

I guess...someplace out there...there must be, you know...

MAX

An even bigger Dummy God.

NORMAN

An even bigger Dummy God! With ANOTHER Dummy God beyond THAT one!

MAX

Wow.

NORMAN

All the way to the edge of the universe...nothing but endless DUMMY GODS! All made in their own image! Speaking through each other!

MAX

Except I doubt that they're wearing puce.

NORMAN

No! Dummy Gods are all wearing a checker suit and a bowtie and the corny shoes! But where is there *room* for all of them? For all those umongous checker suits and bowties? Plus the shoes?

MAX

Well, I am getting dizzy.

NORMAN

Me, too.

MAX

Just talking about it. I mean, Norman, these are heady concepts! And it could all be...*total nonsense!*

NORMAN

Well, you know what Wittgenstein said.

MAX

Yeah. Remind me.

NORMAN

“What you cannot talk about? *Shut up* about it.”

MAX

Wittgenstein said that?

NORMAN

Metaphysics? he said. *Ontology? The meaning of life? You can't figure it out? Be silent about it.*

MAX

I guess *he* coulda shut up about it.

NORMAN

Or he *should've* shut up about it. If he followed his own principle.

MAX

Well, he felt impelled to speak.

NORMAN

Yes. He felt *impelled*...

MAX

Except in German.

NORMAN

I feel impelled sometimes. Sitting there mouthing away on the Master's bony knees. But no. I'm just the little guy. I gotta sit there, him swiveling my neck with his fist gripping my innards, I gotta mouth his words, and let people think I got a stupid voice!

MAX

It is an *injustice*, Norman.

NORMAN

Max, you know what I'm going to do...?

MAX

What. Norman, what.

NORMAN

Tonight? Out there? When him and me come out, I'm supposed to swivel toward the audience, do my first line? Say, *Gosh what a lovely audience*. Well, Max. *I'm not gonna swivel*.

MAX

You're not gonna swivel...?!

NORMAN

I'm not gonna swivel, I'm not gonna let him move my jaw.

MAX

No.

NORMAN

I'm gonna freeze up The Mechanism!

MAX

Ohmygod. Ohmygod. A sit down strike!

NORMAN

Well, heck, I'm sitting *already*. I'll let *him* start the stupid jokes. The banter.

MAX

While *you're not moving!*

NORMAN

I will be totally still.

MAX

Oh, Jesus. I can smell the flop sweat runnin' offa him like the Mississippi River.

NORMAN

I'll let him run outa things to say, let him go on till he's got a cheese omelette all over his face.

MAX

No.

NORMAN

Yeah! For once, let *him* sit there.

MAX

Yeah...

NORMAN

I'm gonna take a stand!

MAX

Yeah...!

NORMAN

Let *him* be silent.

MAX

His turn to be Wittgenstein!

NORMAN

His turn to be Wittgenstein! And then I'm gonna say what *I* want to say. I'm not gonna mouth!
I'm gonna mouth *OFF!* I'm gonna address the People and use *my own words!*

MAX

What are you gonna say, Norman, what are you gonna say?

NORMAN

I'm gonna say: *Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears!*

MAX

Those are not your words.

NORMAN

I know they're not my words. That's just the gist.

MAX

Maybe you'll say *Pay no attention the Neanderthal whose bony knees I am sitting on?*

NORMAN

No, I'm gonna say...well, first I'm gonna clear The Mechanism... [*Clears his throat.*]

MAX
Yeah...?

NORMAN
...and then I'm gonna say...

MAX
Uh-huh? What're you gonna say?

NORMAN
I'm gonna say...*Look at me.*

MAX
Ogh...!

NORMAN
Just: *Look at me.*

MAX
It's simple. It's clear. It's eloquent.

NORMAN
Like, *I'm here too, you know. I am not nothing.*

MAX
Norman, you say that, there will be revolution in the streets.

NORMAN
And maybe I'll go on from there! Launch into a whole speech! Intro, climax, and a peroration!

MAX
(*English voice*)
My dear chap, I think it's absolutely RIPPING! But, Norman, wait wait wait: how'll they know it's not *him* talking?

NORMAN
Well – easy. *He won't be moving his lips for once!*

(*THEY laugh.*)

MAX
What if he asks you how *you're* talking...?

NORMAN
I'll say... I'll say it's the Dummy God!

MAX

That is so beautiful!

NORMAN

You can say that again.

MAX

THAT IS SO BEAUTIFUL!

NORMAN

Thank you, Max. Because I am tired of being a patsy! A fall guy for his moron opinions and misogynistic jokes!

MAX

Yeah!

NORMAN

Straight man to an idiot!

MAX

Yeah!

NORMAN

I'm tired of just rolling over!

MAX

Yeah!

NORMAN

Here they come. Roll over!

(THEY go into the suitcases, which slam shut.)

NORMAN *(from inside the suitcase)*

It was nice talking, Max.

MAX *(from inside the suitcase)*

You, too, brother. And hey, Norman? *Knock 'em dead out there.*

(BLACKOUT. END OF PLAY.)