

TRUE TO LIFE

a play by

David Ives

For four actors

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(Lights come up on JAKE and RACHEL, mid-30's, in an isolated area downstage. She wears a handsome party outfit with noticeably blue high heels. He is in a drab, worn jacket and slacks. The only set element – for the moment – is a stand with a collection of plastic snowglobes.)

RACHEL

It's just the truth, Jake. It's the simple facts. What else can I say?

JAKE

Am I really standing here? Am I really hearing this? Is this *you*?

RACHEL

I'm sorry. Yes it is me. I'm sorry. How many times do I have to say it?

JAKE

Where's Rachel, the woman I've been going out with for two years? Who I thought I actually *knew*? Send her in, let me talk to her.

RACHEL

Don't you see, Jake? We want different things. I want children and a husband and a home. You don't.

JAKE

Well, I don't want a *husband*, anyway. Not unless he's really the right guy.

RACHEL

Funny. Very funny. Thank you.

JAKE

Since when is trying to be funny a crime with the two of us?

RACHEL

Since now. Since tonight. You can't joke your way out of this and neither can I. It's just... it's life, Jack. Life, goddamit.

JAKE

But I love you, Rachel. I love you.

RACHEL

I know, Jake. I know.

JAKE

I love you.

RACHEL

Love won't work for the two of us. We're too special for that tired old thing.

(We have become aware of a third person in the room, whom neither of them acknowledges. This is JACK, also 30's, who should distinctly remind us of JAKE, in a jacket and slacks very similar to Jake's. He carries a drinks glass in his hand.)

RACHEL

I swear to God I never thought I'd hear these words out of my mouth but... We're over, Jake. Our beautiful time is past.

JAKE

Goddamit, Rachel.

RACHEL

As I say. I'm sorry.

JAKE

Goddamit!

RACHEL

Well I am sorry.

JAKE

Oh, go to hell. "I'm sorry."

RACHEL

Fine. Go to hell, too. Go wherever you want. Just...fuck off, okay?

JAKE

You are tearing the heart right out of me! And I'm supposed to just take that? I'm supposed to live with that? I love you, Rachel! How am I supposed to fuck off?

RACHEL

Just go away, will you! Leave!

(Suddenly the LIGHT ON RACHEL AND JAKE CHANGES to a golden light and MUSIC comes up: "*Nuit d'ivresse*" from Berlioz's *The Trojans*. Their mood instantly changes to mellowness. JAKE takes RACHEL in his arms.)

JAKE

You know, gorgeous, it's so ironic.

RACHEL

Well, sure. Everything's ironic when you look at it the right way? What's ironic today?

JAKE

The first words I ever heard about you. The first time I ever heard your name. From your friend Mimi.

(A LOUD DOOR BUZZER sounds, which JAKE and RACHEL don't acknowledge but JACK does, though he does not answer.)

I'll never forget it. Mimi and I are walking in a blinding snowstorm and Mimi says, "I can't wait for you to meet my friend Rachel. You are going to *love* Rachel."

(DOOR BUZZER AGAIN. JACK paces in agitation. JAKE AND RACHEL remain oblivious.)

So we continue through this blizzard and on the next corner we just happen to run into you. And Mimi was right. I did love Rachel....

(BUZZER, insistent.)

JACK

(into intercom)

Hello! Who is it? Hello?

JAKE

...a woman who collected snowstorms in plastic domes...

RACHEL

(picking one up and shaking it, *Citizen-Kane*-style:)

"*Rosebud...!*"

JAKE

...and I was blissful.

RACHEL

Excuse me. *We* were blissful.

JAKE

We were blissful.

RACHEL

Are blissful.

JACK

(into intercom)

Hello?

RACHEL

We do bliss very well.

JAKE

We do irony very well.

RACHEL

We do everything very well.

JAKE

Care to dance, lady?

(He takes her into his arms and they dance in a tight embrace.)

JACK

(into intercom)

Hello! Is anybody there?

(DOOR BUZZER.)

Oh, all right...

(Into intercom.)

Come on up!

(He buzzes open the downstairs door and paces nervously.)

JAKE

Now here it is snowing all over again. True to life, huh.

RACHEL

Jake – what do you say we keep doing *this*. What do you say we do it forever.

JAKE

Forever's a long time.

RACHEL

So we'll slot it in.

JAKE

Darlin', you got yourself a deal.

(By now, we have become aware that we are in a modest New York apartment. A door with an intercom. A couch. Some liquor bottles. A KNOCK at the door. JACK hesitates to answer. THE MUSIC FADES as JAKE and RACHEL DANCE OFF. The stand with the snowdomes disappears. ANOTHER KNOCK.)

(JACK opens the door to RUTH, a handsome and smartly dressed woman of his own age who should distinctly remind us of RACHEL.)

RUTH

May I speak to you?

(JACK says nothing.)

May I speak to you, please?

(JACK still says nothing.)

RUTH (CONT'D)

I guess not. May I come in?

(JACK steps aside to let her in.)

Well, Jack?

JACK

Hello, Ruth.

RUTH

Guess where I just came from.

JACK

The theatre.

RUTH

I'm coming from the theatre. Actually, I'm coming from circling the block in the snow for about five hours.

JACK

Do you want a drink?

RUTH

No. Before circling I was at the matinee of a certain off-off-off-Broadway play called *True To Life*.

JACK

I know.

RUTH

Maybe you've heard of this play. I went with Mindy -- alias "*Mimi*" -- and her offstage husband.

JACK

I know.

RUTH

And Bill and Cindy, or -- as you so subtly called them in this play -- "Bob and Sandy."

JACK

I know.

RUTH

Could you have been a little more transparent, please?

(She stops, taking in what he said.)

What do you mean, you *know*...

JACK

I was there today, at the back. You actually brushed right by me going in.

RUTH

You mean you watched me watch that thing?

JACK

No, I left the theatre when you came in. I went around the corner for a gallon of scotch. Do you want some?

RUTH

No.

JACK

Do you want to sit down?

RUTH

No.

JACK

Still snowing out, huh. So how are you, Ruth?

RUTH

Oh, we're not going to pretend this is a social conversation, are we? Hello, how are you, nice blizzard, found any good restaurants lately? We're not going to let this disintegrate into chit-chat, are we? And will you stop staring at me like that?

JACK

I'm sorry. I just can't believe you're really standing here. I can't believe I'm actually hearing you speak and that I'm talking to you.

RUTH

You mean instead of writing a play about me and communicating through two so-so actors and a lovely review in the Times?

JACK

It was an okay review.

RUTH

Can we not quibble about your notices right now?

JACK

You know, that play is not about *you*.

RUTH

Oh, no? It's not about me? That play should include my bio in the program. Hold the playbill over a candleflame and my picture appears with a phone number. "For another angle on these events, call Ruth, 555-FURIOUS." You put my whole apartment down to the snowdome on my desk into that play and it's not about *me*?

JACK

It's a play about larger patterns of human behavior.

RUTH

Oh. I'm sorry, I missed that during the mention of my parents' *street address*. And a woman standing on a stage in my blue shoes. Or a not-very-reasonable facsimile thereof. Is that the pattern you mean? Reprehensible capitalist footwear? So let's discuss this play.

JACK

Can I take your coat?

RUTH

No, I'm only staying long enough to kill you and then leave. You must've guessed I'd want to discuss this play with you. Or maybe you didn't. Maybe you thought I'd ignore it. Maybe you thought I wouldn't notice it. Maybe you thought I'd see that listing in Time Out Magazine and move to Kowloon. But did you really think you could drop into the weekend listings a play about a tragic relationship between two people who sounded very much like you and me and that I would go see the new Terminator movie instead?

JACK

I didn't put that listing in. My producers did.

RUTH

The minute I read that listing I should've come over here with a gun and a good alibi. Do you realize what it took for me to come over here and ring your doorbell?

JACK

You're as brave as ever.

RUTH

No, I'm just pissed off. Maybe pissing me off was what you intended. Well, Jack, you succeeded, because here I am and I'm *really* pissed off.

JACK

I bet.

RUTH

You're not going to kill me, are you?

JACK

No.

RUTH

This wasn't an elaborate ruse to lure me over here and stab me in the heart?

JACK

No.

RUTH

Christ, it's been *two years*, Jack.

JACK

Two years and two months.

RUTH

Don't you think we deserve a break? If only for a commercial and station identification? Couldn't we normalize relations between our respective war zones? Yes. We broke up. Yes. I kicked you out. Don't think of me as a demon. Think of me as a shmuck. And don't you think that when we pass each other in the street you could *not* give me a slitty-eyed look and turn around and walk the other way? How about a civilized hello-how-are-you and then just moving on? Could you *not* send back well-meant poignant postcards congratulating you on previous theatrical successes with "RETURN TO SENDER, ADDRESSEE UNINTERESTED" scrawled in black ink over the heartfelt message? *Burn* them, but please don't send them back to me, which is *rude*. Do you know my heart is thumping right out of my chest?

JACK

How are you otherwise?

RUTH

Good. Good. Dazed.

JACK

I bet.

RUTH

Dazed and confused.

JACK

You shouldn't have put a return address on that postcard.

RUTH

I wanted to make sure it got to you. My heart is thumping right out of my chest.

JACK

Want to sit down?

RUTH

No.

JACK

Take your coat?

RUTH

No. Your play was so moving, Jack.

(Reaches for her purse, about to cry.)

Oh, God, oh, God...

JACK

(handing her a handkerchief)

Here.

RUTH

No, I have some.

(Unravels wads of KLEENEX from her bag and takes one.)

I started crying the minute I sat down in those disgusting seats. Then I got gum all over my coat and sobbed like Medea. Do you know what this coat cost me? During the play people kept telling me to shut up, I was bawling so hard. I wanted to say, *I have a right to weep at this play, I wept at it BEFORE it was a play*, but I had to preserve my incognito. I should think you feel very odd right now, Jack. I sure do. That was the oddest 92 intermissionless minutes of my life.

JACK

I bet.

RUTH

It was *macabre*. Sitting there among retirees from the Jewish Home and hearing *my words* out of someone else's mouth -- ?

JACK

I bet.

RUTH

The words I could *hear* through the candywrappers and tubercular hacking, and the guy clipping his toenails in the row behind me. Not that they were *all* my own words. I can't conceive that I ever actually said the words "Our beautiful time is past."

JACK

You did, actually.

RUTH

Well, I *know* I never used the word "inspissated."

JACK

In jest you once did.

RUTH

I've done lots of things in jest that I'd rather forget, but I'm sure I'd remember "inspissated." I don't even know what it means.

JACK

It means--

RUTH

Never mind. – Okay, hit me. What does it mean?

JACK

To thicken or make dense.

RUTH

I'll have to use it.

JACK

She didn't say that line very well anyway.

RUTH

You should've called me in, I could've coached her on my rhythms. "Inspissate"? You know you might take my coat. It's as airless as ever in this rathole.

(He takes her COAT.)

I see you still live in Plato's cave – minus the creature comforts.

JACK

This place is all I need.

RUTH

It's more than some repeat offenders *get*. My heart is thumping right out of my chest. Breathe, Ruth. Breathe.

JACK

Want a drink?

RUTH

It's not that vile yellow Yugoslavian scotch is it?

JACK

Our brand.

RUTH

Your brand, thank you. At my place you always got Bushmill's – which *I* paid for, by the way. So you were expecting me.

JACK

No, it's left over from two years and two months ago.

RUTH

Yes, I'll have one. Her blue shoes, by the way, were hideous. I wouldn't be caught dead in those shoes, especially onstage playing me. Mindy-alias-Mimi was appalled.

JACK

They were the best blue shoes an off-off-off Broadway budget allows.

RUTH

I would've donated the Gucci originals but I burned them in a Santorìa ritual trying to murder you. Bastard. *Bastard*.

JACK

I am a bastard.

RUTH

Don't tell *me* you're a bastard. I was *there* that night holding up my own end of the proceedings. Boy, did she get on my nerves.

JACK

She the actress, or she-as-you?

RUTH

She-as-me. Yap, yap, yap. I was never that arch. I may be groin vaulting but I am never arch.

JACK

Not that the play is—

RUTH

No, no, not that the play is *autobiographical*. Yes, I read your feeble disclaimer in the program. "Any resemblance between these characters and living people is purely coincidental." *What?* With my cousin Arnie woven subtly into the text? About twelve times?

JACK

The lawyer made me put in that disclaimer.

RUTH

So write a play about *him*!

JACK

Her.

RUTH

Her! Or give me her number, I'll sue you.

JACK

You know, Ruth – I never talked about you. Not with the cast or the director or anyone else. I never discussed the play as autobiographical.

RUTH

You must've fooled the hell out of them. A play called *True To Life* with a character named "Jake" -- Jack/Jake, hmmm, a *curious coincidence* -- who also has every identifiable personal tic of yours except the birthmark on your dick. It was the only thing you *didn't* put in.

JACK

(handing her a drink)
Proust.

RUTH

Nazdrovye.

JACK

What birthmark on my dick?

RUTH

I could draw it in my sleep. You know, the one shaped like Samuel Beckett's face? When you got a hard-on he turns into Bugs Bunny?

JACK

The play is called *True To Life* not because it's autobiographical, but because those two characters are true to the way life is for everyone everywhere at all times. And he's named Jake as in Jacob, who wrestled with an angel and had a vision of a ladder to heaven. You recall the *ladder* she gets in her stocking?

RUTH

I didn't realize her pantyhose were Biblical. But I was distracted by other matters. Like the blue shoes.

JACK

She wears blue shoes not because you had a pair of blue shoes but because blue is the color of transcendence.

RUTH

Oh, boy, you're a *shrine* to self-delusion, aren't you. But thanks for the gloss. By the way, it was a nice touch to make him an algebra teacher. Too bad he spent the play railing about the theatre and quoting Shakespeare. Maybe it was a subtle clue for the cognoscenti.

JACK

I don't have a birthmark on my dick.

RUTH

Like a wen. So big it could be a trademark. Can you believe we're standing here talking like two mature civilized people? Penile imperfections, everything's grist for the mill, so free and easy. I think I'm going to cry again.

JACK

More?

RUTH

God, it's vile. Sure.

(Gives him GLASS and he pours.)

You made me nicer than I am in your play. I was never that nice.

JACK

I made you as nice as you actually are.

RUTH

Well, that night I was a needy, greedy bitch. Driving you off howling into the night.

JACK

Neediness and greediness isn't what I wanted to say about you. I mean – about this character who may have some resemblance to you.

RUTH

You weren't afraid to paint yourself as a pompous ass.

JACK

I am a pompous ass. It's called realism.

RUTH

I thought you hated realism.

JACK

I do hate realism. Realism is not only the bane of the theatre, it is the bane of reality. Do you know what the *real* problem of the theatre is?

RUTH

Sure. The movies. Followed quickly by television, which you may not have heard about, being too busy sharpening your quill pen. I once gave you a television, as I remember. You seemed to think it was some kind of planter.

JACK

It's in the closet, with a dead geranium in it.

RUTH

They did six episodes of that geranium, but it only got a two share, so they cancelled it.

JACK

I'm amazed you went to a play – even one about you. Or someone very like you.

RUTH

I have to say I didn't relish seeing my life in a 99-seat meat locker on East Thirteenth Street and Avenue T -- even though the house was full, as one wants it for one's life. I would rather see my life ninety feet wide at the Ziegfeld, or onstage at the Winter Garden with Kate Beckinsale playing me in front of three thousand well-paying tourists.

JACK

You don't see it – you don't go to it – but the theatre is the greatest invention of man.

RUTH

After room service.

JACK

Theatre came into the world at the same moment as democracy, and is the perfect expression of democracy. A group of strangers gathers together for a brief time to make something. To get something right. To create an event. Each person contributing his or her particular talent and each of those people *essential* to the process or the event does not come off. Like democracy theatre is an agreement among strangers that they will get along for the greater good, for the sake of this evanescent event. And the event happens, not on a ninety-foot screen, not in a miniaturizing box in your living room, but – just like democracy – with real people, in real time. While the audience sits as in a Senate.

RUTH

But you don't get to eat Chinese food while you watch it.

JACK

Theatre is the only artform in which the artwork *grows*. A play is not an object. It's a living organism. A slimy, wriggling, mortal amoeba.

RUTH

Eeeuw.

JACK

And then the organism breaks up, the individual cells go their way, applying what they have learned to the next one. A little wiser. Sometimes sadder. Sometimes disappointed. But hopeful. Like life, you see.

RUTH

Allow me to repeat myself: *eeeuw*. And if the theatre is so great, why can't anybody make a living off of it?

JACK

The theatre's bankruptcy is its glory.

RUTH

You should know.

JACK

You have to be an idiot to make theatre for money. The only reason you can do theatre is because you *want* to. You can only do it for *love*. And anyone can do it, anytime they want to. You don't need fifty million dollars and a movie studio. That's democratic, too.

RUTH

Look, it's not that I despise the theatre.

JACK

Yes, you do.

RUTH

Okay, I despise the theatre but I also just don't get it. You watch people wander around with drinks in their hands...

JACK

Another?

RUTH

No thanks. ...all walking sideways and telling each other things they already know.

JACK

You have to do the exposition somehow. How's your job, by the way?

RUTH

My well-paying job here on New York's 55th Street in cable television? It's good.

JACK

What did Mindy think of the play?

RUTH

Mindy-slash-Mimi was very surprised. She hates you, you know, for the way you acted.

JACK

I hate myself for the way I acted.

RUTH

She still cried her own eyes out onto my left sleeve.

JACK

It doesn't mean she doesn't still hate me.

RUTH

Oh, she still hates you. It didn't help that her "Mimi's" husband kept getting referred to onstage as a Republican butthole. *He* was sitting to my right.

JACK

Appropriately.

RUTH

He hates you, too.

JACK

I'm flattered.

RUTH

That's why I took Mimi and the Butthole, and entered surrounded by friends in flying wedge formation. So that we could all hate you together. But we were all very, very surprised. Me most of all. And it wasn't just me weeping. Those 99 grotesque people loved your play, Jack.

JACK

Those 99 people were irrelevant. Because that play was a letter intended for one audience member only. Today, that letter got delivered. Also -- I didn't want you and me to die. As a two-some, I mean.

RUTH

I know.

JACK

I wanted to preserve us and I wanted to think about us. That play was my way of doing it.

RUTH

After that night, I wanted to do that, too. I wanted to turn my rage into capital-A Art.

JACK

Writing well is the best revenge. And did you?

RUTH

No, I turned my rage into a personal ad in the New York Review of Books. "Funny Sexy Articulate Woman Seeks Funny Sexy Articulate Man."

JACK

Oof. Ouch. No. *Ruth*.

RUTH

Yes. Which netted me an evening with an actuary who had lard on his glasses and dandruff in his eyebrows. It was like talking to someone through a very light snowfall.

JACK

You and I met in a snowfall.

RUTH

Well, his drifted into my drink. Sifting very slowly past what looked like a cum stain on his tie. Great fuck, though.

JACK

So did those two people onstage seem like us? Did I get us?

RUTH

You got every bit of us and that whole shitty night. You saved all my words, Jack.

JACK

Our words.

RUTH

Except for "inspissate," which nobody uses. Thank you. Did you transcribe us while I was in the bathroom or were you wearing a wire all the time?

JACK

I didn't need a wire. I knew us by heart.

RUTH

You saved our theme song, too.

JACK

If Berlioz had known about us when he wrote that duet in *The Trojans*, he would've demanded royalties.

RUTH

I just wish he'd cut an hour from the damn thing.

JACK

Did you really sleep with the guy with dandruff in his eyebrows?

RUTH

Nah. Just let him feel me up. You know, you've changed, Jack. You're more serious. And since you were Dostoevsky before, *that's serious*.

JACK

Life stopped seeming very funny about, oh, two years and two months ago.

RUTH

When I say you've changed, what I really mean is, Have *I* changed?

JACK

Not at all.

RUTH

Good answer.

JACK

You're as beautiful as ever.

RUTH

I'd love to see what you cut in rehearsal.

JACK

I still have the first draft. It weighed about sixteen pounds.

RUTH

It's probably mostly him saying "fuck you" to her.

JACK

It is. After I cut out the fuck-you's I hardly had a full-length play.

RUTH

It's still a bit thin for \$62.50.

JACK

You paid full price?

RUTH

For once in my life. And never again.

JACK

You should've called me. With all those friends, I could've gotten you a group discount.

RUTH

Who knew? Who knew I could've survived seeing it all on my lonesome? But yes, Jack, those two idiots looked *exactly* like us on that horrible night.

(JOSH and REBECCA ENTER from right, dressed very much like JAKE and RACHEL. Neither couple acknowledges the presence of the other.)

REBECCA

Fuck you.

JOSH

No, Rebecca. Fuck you. *Fuck. You.*

REBECCA

It's just the truth, Josh. It's just the simple facts.

JOSH

Am I really standing here? Am I really hearing this? From *you*? Send in Rebecca, will ya?

REBECCA

It's not like there's any news here.

JOSH

Where's the woman I've been going out with for two years? Why don't you send her in, let me talk to *her*.

REBECCA

Very funny, Josh.

JOSH

I'm not trying to be funny.

REBECCA

Hysterical.

JOSH

I'm trying to *understand*, Rebecca.

REBECCA

Okay, then, understand this: *we're over*. Can I get any clearer than that?

JOSH

Fuck you.

REBECCA

Fine.

JOSH

Fuck you.

REBECCA

You don't want to get married, I'll find somebody else who does.

JOSH

Good luck, darling.

REBECCA

Jerk.

JOSH

Bitch.

REBECCA

Asshole.

JOSH

Okay, so this is it? We're over? Well, I guess this means I should leave.

REBECCA

What do you want, an instruction booklet and a map?

JOSH

Fine. Okay. Well when I step out that door, I don't want to see you, or hear from you, I don't want you to call me, I don't want you to think of me, I don't even want you to *remember* me.

REBECCA

Why would I want to?

JOSH

Fuck you.

REBECCA

So leave!

JOSH

Fucking princess!

REBECCA

Leave!

JOSH

Fuck you!

REBECCA

Fuck you!

JOSH

No, fuck YOU!

(They EXIT, saying "Fuck you.")

RUTH

Yeah, I think you captured us to a T.

JACK

But why "surprised"? You said you were surprised.

RUTH

Because I never knew until today that you cared, Jack.

JACK

Never knew I...?

RUTH

I didn't know I was "tearing the heart out of you" that night. Frankly, Scarlett, I didn't know you gave a shit. Not till I was in that revolting seat in Row G, weeping uncontrollably. I had no idea I had gotten to you like that. When you walked out that night I thought I was out of life and mind. Gone. Erased.

JACK

Ruth, I'm amazed.

RUTH

I didn't know I played such a part in the play of your life until today. Because there was one word in your play that I never heard from your lips, Jack. "Love." Never. Not once. I never said inspissated, you never said love. Now *that's* what I call a revelation scene. That's what I call *dwama*.

JACK

I'm flabbergasted.

RUTH

Good. Then we're even. When he said "I love you" I almost urinated on my chair. Somebody else had, what difference could it make?

JACK
God. God! You didn't *know*?

RUTH
"Love"? As in "I love you"?

JACK
Of course *love*.

RUTH
Nope. Sorry. News to me, pal.

JACK
You didn't know? How could you not know?

RUTH
It's a shocker, ain't it. I thought I was just another girl you went out with, had a nice time with and didn't want to marry and have children with. Now I know something I didn't know then. Very unfortunate *after two years*. And why is my heart thumping out of my chest again?

JACK
Christ...!

RUTH
Take that, Mr. Irony. If memory serves, you say -- I mean "*your character*" -- says, "I love you"...

JACK
He says it twice.

RUTH
And then she says –

JACK
"I know."

RUTH
You never said that. I never said that. I didn't know. I almost stood up in seat G3 and asked for an instant replay. "Hey, could you repeat that, please? You don't know me but I own a pair of blue shoes. I'm an interested party."

JACK
But how could you not know?

RUTH

What'm I, psychic? You never *said*. You never *showed*. You never gave me an inkling, you fucking idiot! I had to go to the goddamn theatre to pick up my old messages. Why didn't you just *tell* me on the spot and save me double therapy?

JACK

I thought I did tell you!

RUTH

You explained Kurosawa movies in great detail. "I love you?" No. This you did not mention. Okay, it's a small point. A minor omission.

JACK

I thought I was perfectly clear!

RUTH

You thought you put my blue shoes in your play because blue is transcendent. You moron! You asshole! Well! Now I'm really starting to feel better. Maybe I can market this. "Breathe better. Sock it to your old boyfriend."

JACK

I am a total idiot. An asshole.

RUTH

Pompous asshole. But I love seeing this look on your face. Bambi gets cornholed. Okay. A day of surprises for both of us. Not that it makes any difference.

JACK

No difference? It makes a huge difference!

RUTH

How? It's years ago, Jack, and yes it's sad to find out such minor details, but – we wouldn't have worked out anyway. We would've fallen apart anyway. You do *know* that. You know that, don't you?

JACK

Yes, I know.

RUTH

What happened that night would've happened sometime.

JACK

I know.

RUTH

Two totally opposite people wanting totally opposite lives. Husband, house and kids for me. Gloom, doom and the destruction of the bourgeois state for you. I'm smart and materialistic and a life force. You're smart and socialistic and a death force. I mean that in a very positive way.

JACK

Thank you, sweetie.

RUTH

It was like having Kafka for a boyfriend. We were matching comedy/tragedy masks. Then you'd start throwing words like "Weltanschauung" and "Zeitgeist" at my friends, making your gloom infectious. And I'll make a personal confession. I got a little tired of being Celebrated Fringe Genius's girlfriend. I wanted to be a genius, too. Minus the unsightly fringe.

JACK

Maybe they'll institute a Nobel for TV marketing.

RUTH

Well, I'll get it if they do.

JACK

But in a world where the barbarians are winning and everybody's up to their ears in crap and people are pixillated by technology, we at least knew who Kafka *was*.

RUTH

Actually, till I met you I thought Kafka was a kind of Hungarian handbag. Now I know that he's a Czech handbag who wrote in German.

JACK

You know I recently dropped the name Orwell on a date and the woman thought it was a kind of cookie.

RUTH

What, you mean – it's *not*?

JACK & RUTH

Uh-oh!

RUTH

Yes, The Orwell: gray wafer on the outside, grey cream on the in. I once asked a date if he'd ever seen "The Trojans" and he took out a rubber.

JACK

End of that date.

RUTH

Well, not actually. Sorry. Great fuck, too.

JACK

But look, you and I were holding the line against ignorance and mediocrity and kitsch. What a great merging of sensibilities we were.

RUTH

You mean the 16th century and the 21st? It's not your usual, I grant you that.

JACK

We laughed a lot.

RUTH

Yes, and by now the laughing would be over. You and I would be married and divorced with a neurotic child -- is there any other kind? -- to share on weekends in the city, having lost our shot at a country house in the settlement.

JACK

True.

RUTH

Other people are happy that way, but we wouldn't be. Or *I* wouldn't be.

JACK

True.

RUTH

We were oh so right and oh so wrong for each other, Jack.

JACK

You know what Dante once said?

RUTH

"I think that I shall never see a poem as lovely as a tree"?

JACK

He said, "There is no sadder thing than looking back on a happy time from a sad one."

RUTH

I hope that's brilliant in Italian, because it's trite as hell in English. I needed Dante to tell me *that*? Now I'm *really* glad I never read him.

JACK

You told me you did.

RUTH

I lied, okay? I also think Schoenberg should've been shot in his cradle – before he *really* started screaming. So there.

JACK

Well, at least we're finally getting things straight.

RUTH

And look at us. We're talking! Talking and breathing at the same time.

JACK

A miracle.

RUTH

A miracle. That's life. I find out that you loved me.

JACK

And that's also life.

RUTH

Yes, and that's also life.

(They almost kiss, but back away.)
So now we understand everything and we'll be friends.

JACK

We'll be good friends.

RUTH

We'll do lunch. We'll meet for drinks and the occasional friendly movie. We'll double-date. I take that back. We'll single-date, then call each other and dish.

JACK

I love it.

RUTH

And what've you been doing these last, oh, two years and two months, Marty?

JACK

Missing you. Hating you. Trying to shake you off my tail. I met you in a snowstorm and you know what? I've been in that snowstorm ever since. You whisper in my ear at every party. You look over my shoulder at every movie and play. You tell me what you think of every book I read. You're still with me everywhere I go.

RUTH

No wonder I'm so tired.

JACK

You're still the realest thing that ever happened to me. And all our time together still feels like this morning.

RUTH

Not to sound trite, but it was a long time ago. Called "Then."

JACK

No.

RUTH

My calendar says "then."

JACK

The past is always with us.

RUTH

I thought that was the poor.

JACK

I *am* the poor.

RUTH

And still here with us. Q.E.D.

JACK

In the end, the past is all we've got.

RUTH

But you know, they've invented this new thing called The Present? You should try it sometime. And they're working on something called The Future. I can't wait. I hear it works.

JACK

What've *you* been doing these past two years and two months, Marty?

RUTH

Oh, not too much, Marty. You know – stupid things like getting older.

JACK

You don't look a day older.

RUTH

The miracle of modern hair coloring. It still amazes me. I'm going to be *forty*.

JACK

Not for five years.

RUTH

Don't get literal. It's still forty. I've also been doing stupid things like going out with married men.

JACK

Oh, no. Say it ain't so, Ruth.

RUTH

Talk about men who don't want to get married. Try *married* men. Jack, you have no idea the price I paid for us.

JACK

You didn't know I LOVED you?

RUTH

My sonar was broken! You were a mute! I'm *stoopid*! Okay?

JACK

Maybe I didn't say the words, but did you ever hear of subtext?

RUTH

I couldn't hear the subtext through your explication of *Finnegans Wake*. Sorry.

JACK

I can't believe you never found anybody to marry.

RUTH

Yeah, well, these things happen.

JACK & RUTH

Or not.

RUTH

Or-well.

JACK

Bloody fools.

RUTH

You must be seeing someone. Strapping priapic fellow like you.

JACK

Nope. Nobody. You seeing anybody?

RUTH

I have been seeing somebody but I think he's nobody. Explain something, please.

JACK

A-squared plus B-squared equals C-squared.

RUTH

Thank you.

JACK

And you said I couldn't pass for an algebra teacher.

RUTH

The end of your play. They're squabbling. Suddenly – the lights change, Dido and Aeneas start shrieking over the sound system again, and our hero and heroine start dancing just as they do at the top of the play.

JACK

That's right.

RUTH

Did I miss a step? Not that the play is auto-bio-etcetera, but I don't believe this dance happened at the end of *our* long horrible evening, and it sure as hell didn't make any sense in theirs.

JACK

I thought that was perfectly clear.

RUTH

Yes, you thought the ladder in her pantyhose was clear. Well, the light change and the sudden blast of Berlioz sure went over my head.

JACK

You didn't get it? It's a memory play!

RUTH

Ohhhh, it's a *memory play*. Well, I missed that. Or else I forgot it. So memory play means--? I'm sorry. Berlioz can come on and people dance at the drop of a curtain?

JACK

Don't you see? The two of them are misremembering the whole thing. I left clues all over the place. How could you miss that it was a memory play?

RUTH

I guess I was still stuck on the word "love." It was a lot to take in for one afternoon.

JACK

The whole point is, they're trapped in the past.

RUTH

You mean, *he's* trapped in the past.

JACK

No, they both are. They'll never get out of that room. That situation. Each other. That evening trapped them forever in a single moment in time. The moment that marked them. They're prisoners. You see? Of memory.

RUTH

Uh-huh.

JACK

They're doomed to repeat that evening forever, circling from happiness to unhappiness and back again.

RUTH

I somehow missed that, Senator. And frankly, I find it a bit creepy. But I'm a linear kinda gal. Ask my college boyfriend.

JACK

Okay, so I didn't pull it off.

RUTH

No. Wait.

JACK

I didn't make it clear.

RUTH

Jack, it *is* clear – now that you're telling me.

JACK

It has to be clear at the moment, on the spot, in the theatre.

RUTH

Don't forget, I wasn't seeing a play. I was seeing *us*. I wasn't sitting there analyzing it, and thinking, "This play seems to be going back to the beginning and starting all over again. Hul-lo! *Maybe it's a MEMORY PLAY.*"

JACK

I always told you I hated realistic plays.

RUTH

You also told me you hated two-character plays and unless I missed a major entrance your play had -- let me count'em -- two.

JACK

This one's different.

RUTH

Oh, this one's different.

JACK

In most two-character plays all they can do is kill each other, or fuck each other. All we can do is sit and wonder if they're going to get together. Who *cares* if two people live happily ever after?

RUTH

Sure. Happiness? I leave that to my servants.

JACK

It's like plays in living rooms, with couches.

RUTH

I'm sorry. Did I not detect a couch in *your* little piece?

JACK

That wasn't just a couch.

RUTH

Let me guess. It was a *memory couch*.

JACK

Another drink? Of my brand?

RUTH

Our brand, I believe.

(He kisses her.)

RUTH

Oh, Lawdy! Quick check, is this past or present? Past or present?

(He kisses her again.)

JACK

Present.

RUTH

And now for two extra points – what took it so long? You're sure it's the present?

JACK

Absolutely sure.

(They kiss again as RHONDA ENTERS, wearing an expensive silk dressing gown. She paces nervously and does not acknowledge them, nor they her.)

JACK

We were a hell of a couple, you know.

RUTH

Accent on *hell*, at the end there.

JACK

We had such fun – *and* we know who Kafka and Berlioz and George Orwell are.

(They kiss. DOOR BUZZER. JACK and RUTH do not acknowledge it. RHONDA does, but hesitates to answer it.)

RUTH

But we don't know who we are anymore.

JACK

We could have the great joy of finding out. All over again.

(They kiss. DOOR BUZZER, longer.)

Did you have any idea this might happen?

RUTH

Let me put it this way. I came over here to have things out with you, but I did wear my best undies.

JACK

I remember them well.

RUTH

These are my new best undies. I do buy new ones from time to time.

JACK

See all the new things we get to learn, having it out with each other?

RUTH

You had it out a lot of the time, as I recall.

JACK

Birthmark side up.

(DOOR BUZZER, still longer, as they kiss again. RHONDA picks up a phone that has appeared.)

RHONDA

(into phone)

Yes. Hello... That's okay, George. Send him up, please. Yes, send him up.

RUTH

You know I still want marriage.

JACK

I know.

RUTH

I still want kids.

JACK

I know.

RUTH

A country house.

JACK

Everything's negotiable.

RUTH

Not the country house.

JACK

Okay, so I'll sell myself for scientific experiments.

JACK & RUTH

Again.

RUTH

Only one question. How do I explain this to my friends?

JACK

Tell'em we were just kidding. Tell'em to mind their own business. Tell'em we've grown up. Tell'em we thought about it and changed our minds.

RUTH

Fuck'em.

JACK

Fuck'em.

RUTH

Even more important, what do I tell Mindy, who's been waiting for me out in the snow all this time? She must think I'm dead by now. *She* might be dead by now.

JACK

They'll find her body in the spring.

RUTH

Sure feels like spring to me.

JACK

Isn't it ironic.

RUTH

Well sure. Everything's ironic when you look at it the right way. What's ironic right now?

(KNOCK. THEY KISS. MUSIC COMES UP: BERLIOZ.)

JACK

I think they're playing our song.

RUTH

Care to dance, pal?

JACK

Gladly.
(They embrace and start to dance.)

JACK

Opposite lives, huh?

RUTH

Guess not.

JACK

And what do you say we stay opposite each other for a long, long time?

RUTH

Darlin', you got yourself a deal.

(ANOTHER KNOCK. During all this, the set has transformed into a much swankier version of a New York apartment. Better couch. Better door. Better drinks.)

(JACK and RUTH DANCE OFF as RHONDA opens the door to JOE.)

RHONDA

Hello, Joe. How are you?

JOE

May I come in, Rhonda?

(She lets him by.)

RHONDA

You know where the drinks are.

JOE

Rhonda, I'm seething.

RHONDA

I bet.

JOE

Seething.

RHONDA

Well -- long time no seethe.

JOE

It's been *four years*, Rhonda.

RHONDA

Four years and four months, but I haven't seen you for two years and two months. Now how's that for quick-and-easy exposition?

JOE

Rhonda, don't you think we deserve a *break*?

RHONDA

Do you want a drink?

JOE

No.

RHONDA

Want to sit down?

JOE

No.

RHONDA

Want to take off your coat? Hell of a snowstorm.

JOE

Oh don't play that game with me. Guess where I'm just coming from.

RHONDA

Let me guess. The theatre?

JOE

I'm coming from *The Winter Garden* Theatre. Where I saw the matinee of a certain play called *Opposite Lives*.

RHONDA

I've heard about this play. Any good?

JOE

The action concerns a certain off-off-Broadway playwright named Jack.

RHONDA

Off-off-off, isn't it?

JOE

And a certain blue-shoed woman named Ruth about whom he's written a, quote, "hole-in-the-wall off-off-off-off-off Broadway play."

RHONDA

Opposite Lives, huh. Nice title. How'd you like it?

JOE

Rhonda, I'm furious.

RHONDA

Not surprising, at those ticket prices. It's appalling what it costs to go to the theatre. I could've gotten you in if you'd asked me.

JOE

I presume you're covering your embarrassment with badinage.

RHONDA

I'm badinaging my wounds. My next play: "The Good, The Badinage, and the Ugly."

JOE

Can we talk seriously, please?

RHONDA

Okay, okay, let's talk seriously. How was the house?

JOE

Packed.

RHONDA

I'm sorry.

JOE

PACKED.

RHONDA

It wasn't personal, you know.

JOE

All 5,000-whatever seats. *PACKED!*

RHONDA

I don't force people into those seats, you know. And I can't turn them away if they want to see my little play.

JOE

Whole rafts of the most grotesque tourists.

RHONDA

Those creatures are my bread and butter, darling.

JOE

The tribe next to me brought their own dinner. Ate buckets of Chinese food all through the first act.

RHONDA

The pernicious effects of television, I say. But you know the Winter Garden really is too big for plays. They mostly do musicals there.

JOE

Yes, I think I knew that, *having been writing plays myself since I was nine.*

RHONDA

Well, I don't know anything about the theatre. My producers wanted the Winter Garden, how could I turn them down? It'll be a cash cow, they kept saying. "Cash cow, cash cow." But you know they were right? It *is* a cash cow. You always said TV was our golden calf, but theatre is a cash cow. I have financial problems I never dreamed of. I've never had a cash cow before. I've never even had a cash calf. You were right, Joe. The theatre is a wonderful thing. Great way to get dates, too. *And* it's a cash cow.

JOE

Well, your cow was packed to the udders today.

RHONDA

Can a cow be packed to the udders? Even a cash cow?

JOE

Okay. Bad metaphor. Add it to the pile of them in your play.

RHONDA

You know Mandy-alias-Mindy-alias-Mimi has seen my little play 18 times? Full price, 17 of them.

JOE

Yes, she was hee-hawing with The Butthole in the row right behind me.

RHONDA

So, 19 times. She adores it. She still hates you, but she's coming around.

JOE

And Kate Beckinsale, as you...?

RHONDA

How was Kate today? She had a cold.

JOE

Milking the cow vigorously. Unlike the whining has-been you got to play me.

RHONDA

My producers wanted him, what could I do? I don't know anything about the theatre anyway, and he used to be a soap star, or something.

JOE

I shouldn't say as you and me, of course. I mean "Ruth" and "Jack," our transparent doubles.

RHONDA

Joe, that play is not autobiographical—

JOE
Not autobiographical?

RHONDA
Was it very obvious?

JOE
You should've named your character Vera Similitude.

RHONDA
Too obvious.

JOE
How dare you. How dare you.

RHONDA
I thought people only said that in plays. Not that I know anything about the theatre.

JOE
How dare you.

RHONDA
Guess not. So how dare I what?

JOE
A) How dare you cast me with an incompetent has-been.

RHONDA
I find him vulnerable. You don't?

JOE
B) How dare you write about us like that.

RHONDA
Excuse me. *Excuse me...*

JOE
And about me that way.

RHONDA
Wait a minute, wait a minute. I believe somebody started this avalanche with a certain play of his own called *True To Life* – ?

JOE

And whose title you quote in your own play.

RHONDA

My lawyers said it was all right because nobody knows the play.

JOE

Anyway, that's not what I mean.

RHONDA

Which practically had your neck size and my social security number, included our real-life dialogue, and was just short of including films of us fucking.

JOE

That's not what I mean.

RHONDA

Okay. I apologize. I understand. I stepped into your bailiwick and wrote a play. I'm sorry. So I thought I'd try my hand. Lots of blithering idiots write plays, why not me?

JOE

Thank you.

RHONDA

You know five of the reviews called me a literary genius?

JOE

Yes, I read them.

RHONDA

Look, I didn't force those critics to say that. Or to put me on the cover of Time. And by the way. You hear all this gossip about me being shortlisted for the Nobel Prize, blah blah blah? I don't believe a word of it. HA, HA, HA! I was a genius at marketing, can writing be so hard? Maybe you mean how dare I rake in thousands and thousands and thousands of dollars a week on my first pathetic effort after you sweated under the footlights for years. So I got lucky. So my ship came in. So my pot of gold came sliding down the rainbow. Shit happens.

JOE

You can't sweat *under* footlights, footlights are at your feet.

RHONDA

Along with all the European critics. Do you know I'm going to be on Bulgarian television?

JOE

This is still not what I mean.

RHONDA

Maybe you mean, let's see, how dare I write a play when I despise the theatre.

JOE

That's almost what I mean.

RHONDA

Well, I don't despise it anymore. You know, I LOVE the theatre? Not that I'd want to go to it.

JOE

You ought to love it, it's probably paying for a mansion in Connecticut.

RHONDA

Castle in Switzerland, thank you. Want to see the blueprints?

JOE

No.

RHONDA

Want a drink?

JOE

No.

RHONDA

Your brand. I keep a bottle around to oil the abacus.

JOE

Ha. Ha. So clever.

RHONDA

If not me, then who? Want to sit down?

JOE

No.

RHONDA

Well, take off your coat at least. You're dripping all over my tapestries.

JOE

I will take off my coat.

RHONDA

Phew. Progress at last. *Bruce!*

(A BUTLER ENTERS. Not in traditional butler's livery, but something more black-leather submissive than that, and carrying a SILVER TRAY.)

BUTLER

Yes, madam.

RHONDA

Would you take the gentleman's coat, please?

JOE

Sweet Jesus!

RHONDA

No. Just Bruce. Bruce, this is Jack, *I'm sorry*, this is Joe. Joe, this is Bruce the Butler.

BUTLER

How do you do, sir.

RHONDA

Turn around, Bruce.

(BRUCE does so.)

Nice butt, huh? I guess that's why they –

RHONDA & JOE

-- *call them butlers.*

RHONDA

You were always so clever. Thank you, Bruce.

BRUCE

Yes, madam.

(BRUCE EXITS with coat.)

RHONDA

You should see him in a pinafore. Come on. Have a drink. We can walk sideways and tell each other things we already know. We'll look just like *people in a play!*

JOE

We'll look like the people in *your* play, who might as well have whiskey glasses epoxied to their fists.

RHONDA

Product placement. Bushmill's kicked in a few K. Well, I say epoxy on both their houses.

JOE

That joke is older than Shakespeare.

RHONDA

It worked in scene four of my little play, as you may have noticed. One small drink? Come on, let me give you a finger. As the Brits say. Please? Please?

JOE

All right, I'll have a drink.

RHONDA

Bruce!

JOE

I can pour it.

(He pours himself a drink.)

RHONDA

All right, so you feel insulted.

JOE

Insulted? No, I don't feel insulted.

RHONDA

Calumniated? Slandered? I thought I portrayed you – I mean, *a character somewhat like you* – very nicely in my little play.

JOE

Will you stop calling it "little"? You're at the fucking *Winter Garden*.

RHONDA

Don't you hate these 2,000-seat houses? It's like two-character plays with couches.

JOE

And *why*. *WHY*.

RHONDA

Uh-oh.

JOE

Why the fifteen thousand references to him – i.e., to *me* –

RHONDA

Not autobiographical. It's a play.

JOE

-- having a birthmark on my dick?

RHONDA

It was a character trait. Local color. Sort of a livid purple. Part of what Henry James calls the design in the doormat.

JOE

The figure in the carpet.

RHONDA

You see I read this book, "Playwriting For Dummies." It said you have to give your characters personality.

JOE

I didn't have enough personality? You had to add a birthmark to my dick?

RHONDA

It made my producers laugh. "*Keep the birthmark, we love it!*" I don't know anything about the theatre, what could I do?

JOE

Because I don't have a birthmark on my dick.

RHONDA

Yes, you do. And if you connect it up with the freckles on my tit, they form the face of George Gershwin.

JOE

I do not have a birthmark.

RHONDA

Drop trou and I'll show you. Bruce can be a witness.

JOE

I've looked. In the men's room of the *The Winter Garden Theatre*.

RHONDA

Could I have misremembered? Maybe I confused you with... Oh, shit. Anyway, as I said this isn't biography. It's a play, it's fiction. I meant it to be an elemental figure for life about the patterns of human behavior as it's lived everywhere at all times. Anyway – you feel strongly? Fine. I'll write out the birthmark.

JOE

How can you, after Vanity Fair mentioned it in their cover story?

RHONDA

Yeah, that was unfortunate. I could've fixed that birthmark in previews except you took your sweet time seeing the play. It's been running for weeks. And S.R.Only.

JOE

Thank you.

RHONDA

I scurried off to *your* play first chance I could. I guess you were too busy to catch mine. Didn't you just have something on?

JOE

Yes. A new play.

RHONDA

Right, I meant to catch that. Delaware Shakespeare?

JOE

Hackensack Rep.

RHONDA

Anyway I thought Jack was a very affectionate portrait. The Times called it an affectionate portrait in its full-page review.

JOE

What you did was make Jack a feed for all her jokes.

RHONDA

What's a feed?

JOE

It's an ancient Greek term for the asshole who sets up the star's jokes.

RHONDA

"Feed" isn't related to "cash cow," is it? Well, Kate had me trim down his part to beef up hers. I wonder if "beef" comes from "cash cow."

JOE

Will you stop saying "cash cow, cash cow"?

RHONDA

Aren't we prickly today.

JOE

Even the Times – that full-page review -- called Jack a feed.

RHONDA

Well they have to say *something* negative or they'll look like idiots.

JOE

They *are* idiots! They're parasites. They're vultures. They're buzzards and kites who will batten on the fashionable, suck up to the successful, and jump on the new.

RHONDA

They didn't jump on me. Well, one of them tried, at the party.

JOE

They've all gotten jaded by going to the theatre for free every night of their life instead of paying for it and going for enjoyment like the rest of humanity. Not one of those jokers has ever written a line of dialogue or focused a Leiko or stood in front of an audience spilling their guts, yet *their opinion* is what makes or breaks a playwright's or a director's or an actor's career. And we're supposed to take their word on what's *good*?

RHONDA

You're talking about some of my best friends. The Times did say Jack was the greatest feed in theatre since, who was it...

JOE

“Molière’s pathetic stooges.”

RHONDA

Moliere was a playwright, I guess. I had to cut back Jack's part anyway. The first draft of the play weighed about 16 pounds.

JOE

It was probably mostly *her* trying to fit another joke in edgewise.

RHONDA

It was. That actor couldn't really handle the jokes I gave him anyway. He's not even a very good feed.

JOE

You should've called me in.

RHONDA

I did give your character – what's his name –

JOE

Jack.

RHONDA

I did give Jack a lovely defense of the theatre. Didn't that please you?

JOE

You mean that pious rant about how theatre is an amoeba? Spare me.

RHONDA

But you said all those things.

JOE

[...a growl of exasperation...]

RHONDA

I have it all on tape, if you want to listen.

(Takes out a POCKET TAPE RECORDER.)

JOE

What do you mean, you have it on tape...

RHONDA

Well, you know that night I went to your place -- after *True To Life*? -- I thought you might get violent so I carried a tape-recorder in my bag. The sound is bad because of all the Kleenex, but you can make out a lot. I got quite nostalgic when I transcribed it into the end of the second act. Be my guest.

JOE

You wore a *wire*? You taped our conversation?

RHONDA

My lawyer made me do it. You know, Joe, I never talked about you. Not with the cast, or the director or anybody else. Except with Kate, a little, at some length. But she knows how to keep a secret.

JOE

Except in the Washington Post. The five-page interview where she said the play was based on a couple of dates you had with some jerk.

RHONDA

Kate's not strong on details. And you know how funky memory can be. Anyway, it's an out-of-town paper. Who reads the Washington Post?

JOE

All the wire services that reprinted the piece.

RHONDA

You just can't control those sonsofbitches. Anyway, don't tell me about the media. I'm a media victim, with all this coverage. Now I know what Princess Di felt like.

JOE

People Magazine called to ask me if I was Jack.

RHONDA

Deny everything. *I* did. Well, nearly everything.

JOE

It seems that after years of treating theatre like a suckhole they're starting a theatre section, thanks to your play.

RHONDA

Good for the theatre. Isn't that wonderful?

JOE

They also asked if I was a playwright. They'd heard a rumor from their janitor but I wasn't in their database.

RHONDA

And you said "Yes I Am A Playwright. I am a celebrated prize-winning playwright. The Cleveland Plain Dealer called me a first-rate miniaturist."

JOE

I said "why don't you fuck off you fetid buttplug."

RHONDA

They may have taken that for a yes. Listen, this Vanity Fair interviewer probably didn't know that George Orwell was a playwright either.

JOE

You mean George Orwell the novelist?

RHONDA

And they call this the age of information. You saw my play, it told you I don't know these things.

JOE

What really infuriated me was that you turned us, and I mean us –

RHONDA

You and me.

JOE

Into just another cheap slick mindless Broadway sitcom-clone comedy full of cheesy jokes, with set-ups and payoffs that were ancient in Kaufman and Hart's heyday.

RHONDA

So you have a problem with the style. Who's Kaufman N. Hart?

JOE

It's not a style problem, it's a philosophical problem. An aesthetic problem. A spiritual problem.

RHONDA

That's a lot of problems. "Two! Two! Two mints in one!"

JOE

You have taken three-dimensional capital-L Life and reduced it to a two-dimensional sound bite. Your play is a temple to the utterly banal. A triumph of the mundane.

RHONDA

It's certainly a triumph. We wrapped a million dollars last week. Well, I wish you'd been here to advise me. I mean –

JOE & RHONDA

I don't know anything about the theatre.

RHONDA

How do you feel about the play otherwise?

JOE

It's *kitsch*. It's crap.

RHONDA

I mean, otherwise.

JOE

The piling up of brand names and trademarks, the endless compulsive dropping of celebrity names... All to make it appeal to the lowest common denominator of spectators.

RHONDA

You always said it was the playwright's job to reach people.

JOE

The theatre is a sacred space.

RHONDA

I thought it was the ultimate expression of democracy. Democracy doesn't include brand names? I can't mention Gucci?

JOE

Why didn't you just write this for television, where it belongs?

RHONDA

I did write it for television, but everybody passed. HBO, CBS. Idiots. Along come these producers and want to put it into the Winter Garden. What could I do? They didn't know anything about theatre either. They'd never produced a play in their life. They market a popular line of novelty items, crotchless panties, things like that. They love your work, by the way. They think you're a genius. Not that I ever talked about you.

JOE

A play...

RHONDA

Tony Kushner called the play a masterpiece.

JOE

Fine. A play...

RHONDA

In the New York Review of Books, no less. I don't know if you saw it.

JOE

A play...

RHONDA

Albee had some reservations but called it a great human statement in the London Times.

JOE

You're going to believe these people?

RHONDA

Now the networks have come back to me, but you know what? Fuckum. We're going for a feature.

JOE

With "Kate" playing you?

RHONDA

She's not locked in. And you know she is a bit long in the tooth to play me. Spielberg just has to clear his schedule.

JOE

I'm in a nightmare.

RHONDA

What can I do?

JOE

Will you also stop saying what can I do?

RHONDA

When I say what can I do what I really mean is, I can do plenty, and I intend to. But listen. I'm sorry if I sullied the theatre with my little, with my play. That was not my intention.

JOE

Your intention was to make capital-A Art.

RHONDA

No, my intention was to make some capital-C cash and get out. Now I'm typed! They're calling me a playwright, they're talking Pulitzer. Is the Pulitzer a lot of money?

JOE

No, not much...

RHONDA

I'll donate it to charity. The publicity can't hurt. Then I'll rest on my laurels. Sounds painful. And my royalties. They say the second play is the tough one. You've written a couple of dozen, it can't be that hard.

JOE

I guess your actual intention was to take revenge on me.

RHONDA

No. No, Joe. It was not. I may not have written this play in the style you would like, but my intention was to pay homage to us. To the two of us. To a great couple who had a great time together. *Laughing* together, if you remember. Having *fun* together. Very democratic. I didn't know if people would like my play. I wanted them to like *us*. I wanted them to love us -- and they do, in droves. Most of all I didn't want us to die. I didn't want everything we had together to just vanish.

JOE

Is that why you're selling Jack and Ruth T-shirts in the lobby?

RHONDA

Those weren't my idea. Talk to my tasteless producers.

JOE

"Ruth Brand *BLUE SHOES*?"

RHONDA

Those were my idea. Great advertising. Did you buy a pair? Or a T-shirt?

JOE

At fifty bucks a pop?

RHONDA

And you know they're still selling like crazy? Okay. So maybe you think that cheapens our relationship.

JOE

No, it was the Jack-and-Ruth coasters. I await the board game.

RHONDA

January.

JOE

Why didn't you put out a Jack-and-Ruth dildo with a birthmark on it?

RHONDA

We did think of it. Bad taste. Don't you see, Joe? We're icons! Okay, we're icons for fifteen minutes, but that's the quota anyway.

JOE

You have turned gold into tin.

RHONDA

Joe, in this world – and I'm not talking about 1250 A.D., where you usually hang out, but today's world of here and now – this is good. You think you have to write for all time, but these days? Evanescence is all we have. And it's a lot. You can't play by Shakespeare's rules in this world. He's dead, and you'll lose. So look at it this way. You get people to plunk down a hundred and ten-fifty and hear words like "priapic" and "inspissate" and they might go home and look these words up. It's educational, a candy-coated organic apple. They get to hear a lovely duet from Berlioz they never would have heard.

JOE

Our duet.

RHONDA

It's theirs now, too. Let them have it. Let them enjoy it in *their* ephemeral world.

JOE

Where the barbarians are winning.

RHONDA

How can a world that still has room service be all bad?

JOE

Plato thought so.

RHONDA

That's where I got the idea. Forget about the theatre. To pick up a phone, dial a number and have a pretty blonde boy bring you what you want, bow, shake out your napkin and have sex with you? Or girl. That'll take the edge off evanescence.

JOE

You've actually had sex with room service waiters?

RHONDA

No, but I've sucked off a bellboy or two. *Just kidding. Just kidding.*

JOE

Here I am still being a feed for you.

RHONDA

What's a "feed" again?

JOE

What I really hated...

RHONDA

Was it the couch?

JOE

No, it was the ending. That fade-out-on-a-kiss as Berlioz fades up and they dance off into the future for happily-ever-after? Oh, please.

RHONDA

Why not? What's wrong with that?

JOE

It never happened.

RHONDA

Okay. I have a confession. It's a memory play.

JOE

Ronnie....

RHONDA

I don't understand this stubborn adherence to banal biographical facts.

JOE

It's a lie, that's the problem. It's an emotional lie. Those two people did not end up together in real life and they *would not end up* together in real life. Your play's not true to life.

RHONDA

You mean it's not true-to-*True-To-Life*-your-play.

JOE

No, it's not true to life-life. To how real life works. You won't find that curtain-dropping dance scene on your tape.

RHONDA

A playwright has to use some imagination. "Playwriting For Dummies" said so.

JOE

"Oh, Jack, we were oh so right and oh so wrong for each other."

RHONDA

Good line, huh.

JOE

People only say things like that in plays.

RHONDA

That's why I stuck it in mine. Isn't that why people go to plays? To hear the kinds of things people say in plays? I weep myself every time I hear that line. Unlike "Our beautiful time is past," which I remember from your play and which I never said, but then I don't share your allegiance to banal biographical facts.

JOE

You just let Jack and Ruth get together because it'll make people feel good.

RHONDA

People like to feel good. They like happy endings. They want some hope at the end of the day. Maybe you haven't noticed because you think the purpose of life is to mope and wallow and listen to *Parsifal*. I think the purpose of life is to be as happy as one can in this world's shitty circumstances, and happy endings help make us feel brave enough to face them. So anything that can make people happy, i.e., feel good, is good. What did Samuel Johnson say the purpose of literature was? To help us to enjoy life more, or the better to endure it. You write plays about endurance, I write plays about enjoyment. So sue me. Who suffers? Over to you, Wittgenstein.

JOE

Truth has suffered. And what those two *real* people *actually* did that night was come to terms with each other, learn to be friends, and just move on to their own separate lives.

RHONDA

Yes! And who's going to pay a hundred bucks to see it? And where is the truth, anyway? For ten points.

JOE

At the bottom of a well.

RHONDA

At the bottom of a well! Excellent! I think we have a literary allusion here!

JOE

I'm talking about the truth of life as people actually live it, yes, everywhere and at all times, generation after generation.

RHONDA

Okay, so truth has suffered, but "Ruth" has gained. Six pounds, to be exact, and a healthy stock portfolio.

JOE

Oh, please. Show me your weekly royalty statement, why dontcha.

RHONDA

(producing a PAPER)
Want to see it?

JOE

No, thank you.

RHONDA

I bet you do, out of sheer Strindbergian self-punishment.

JOE

Okay, show it to me.

RHONDA

Read it and bleep.

JOE

(looking at paper)
Sweet Jesus! This thing really is a cash cow.

RHONDA

You know I've always been a sucker for royalty. Then I heard about *royalties*. Boy was I misinformed! Queen Elizabeth? *Fuck. Haw.* But you know about that. You're in the theatre.

JOE

Yes, well, I'm leaving the theatre, actually.

RHONDA

Oh, right. Would Ahab leave the Great White Whale?

JOE

Thank you for the tragic parallel. I've been offered a job writing for the soaps.

RHONDA

Oh, no. Say it ain't so.

JOE

Somebody at CBS saw *True To Life* and thought I'd be great for "As The World Turns."

RHONDA

Ouch.

JOE

I start next week.

RHONDA

So People Magazine hasn't heard of you. Fuckum! Write another play and make them enter you into their database. Kind of a sexy metaphor, isn't it....?

JOE

Your play is wonderful, Ronnie.

RHONDA

Come again, Senator?

JOE

Your play is really wonderful.

RHONDA

You mean on top of being slanderous, meretricious, full of cheesy jokes, and a lie -- and getting your anatomy wrong?

JOE

It's all those things.

RHONDA

Vulgar.

JOE

Vulgar, but vital. Energetic. Fierce. It's got life. What *life*, Ronnie. That crowd today was glowing like phosphorous. Because you ignited them.

RHONDA

Well shucks. Now I'm all embarrassed.

JOE

I loved it and I hated it and I loved it. I loved it because it's you. Essence of you. Pure unbridled you. And I loved it because I love you. I guess I'll always love you. Nothing I can do about it. Ahab and the Great White Whale.

RHONDA

Hey, it's only six pounds.

JOE

How I envied your play. Because I don't have that kind of life. I don't know it. I've never felt it in my life except when I was with you. I never got it into my plays. And that's why I'm leaving the theatre and going to the soaps. Because the theatre needs life, and I don't have that. As you so well put it, I am a death force.

RHONDA

I did mean that –

JOE & RHONDA

-- in a very positive way.

JOE

I haven't written a word in four years and four months. Why? Because you have to write what you know, and you're all I really know. Well, fuck it. You and I didn't work out. The theatre and I didn't work out. I'll live.

RHONDA

You know, I still miss you every minute of the day. But we didn't work out and we wouldn't work out. I do still want a ring on this finger – instead of always getting the finger. I'm not so sure about the kids anymore. Mandy has a slew of them and frankly the little bastards really *get on my nerves*. Making noise and defecating all day. Eeuw.

JOE

Well, in the grand scheme of things, what does it matter if two people get together or not?

RHONDA

I believe that. Friends?

JOE

Friends.

(They shake hands, and almost kiss.)

RHONDA

Well, I feel so much better now.

JOE

I can breathe again.

RHONDA

(picks up SNOWDOME and imitates Citizen Kane)
"Rosebud..." You know, Joe, I have met somebody. We're very happy.

JOE

So I read in Vogue.

RHONDA

He thinks Kafka really is a kind of handbag, but that's okay.

JOE

Right. The Kafka bag. It holds a lot but you can't open it.

RHONDA

He and I are even talking muh-muh-marriage.

JOE

So I read in Details. Which ran quite a photograph of you two.

RHONDA

A terrible photograph.

JOE

Your boyfriend doesn't really look like the shiny side of a bagel?

RHONDA

He does. But *I* look better than that. And you?

JOE

I look better than that, too.

RHONDA

What I mean is, are you happy, and when I say are you happy what I really mean is, are you getting laid?

JOE

Blissfully and all the time.

RHONDA

Good for you. One girl, or a whole platoon?

JOE

One.

RHONDA

That's great, Joe.

JOE

She and I are talking muh-muh-marriage, too.

RHONDA

The bitch. Who is she?

JOE

You'd hate her.

RHONDA

That goes without saying. But *why* would I hate her?

JOE

For the same reason I think your boyfriend's a jerk. Because I *can*.

RHONDA

What do you say we leave off insulting our mutual partners for a while and toast our approaching nuptials?

JOE

Deal.

(RHONDA goes to the drinks table. During this, JIM and RENATA HAVE ENTERED from left, unacknowledged by Joe and Rhonda. RENATA carries an OPEN BOOK and the set is changing yet again.)

RENATA

(reading from the book)

"...What do you say we leave off insulting our mutual partners for a while and toast our approaching nuptials," she asked with a barely suppressed smile. There was a playful, pregnant, sexy silence in the room."

JOE

Why not?

RENATA

"'Why not,' he said, fondly returning her smile."

RHONDA

Our brand, of course.

RENATA

"'Our brand, of course,' she murmured, her voice as silky as a pair of fine satin panties." Oh, Jesus. And here it comes! "Suddenly as from nowhere they seemed to hear the strains of some familiar music."

(MUSIC: BERLIOZ. RHONDA and JOE begin to dance, and dance off.)
I guess Bruce the Butler turned the Berlioz on. *"And before they knew it they were wrapped in each other's arms dancing languorously. She could feel his arousal, the hot point of the lust she knew so well. The strong pure rod of his passion. The Bunsen burner of his need."* Eugh! Ogh! Turn off the burner! I smell gas!

JIM

First printing -- a million copies. Can you believe it?

RENATA

Can you believe that's as far as my fiancé read before he called the wedding off?

JIM

He might've liked the sex scene that follows.

RENATA

Well, he sure blanched at the 28 sex scenes that preceded it. He still thinks I sucked off every bellboy from here to Brentwood.

JIM

Rhonda isn't you. *The Snowdome* a novel.

RENATA

Tell that to Rhonda. Tell that to him.

JIM

How many bellboys was it?

RENATA

Just one.

JIM

Renata, he was a lox and you're well rid of him.

RENATA

A lox *and* a bagel. Two, two, two mints in one. You never met him, but I have to say you captured him in the book.

JIM

I saw his picture in the paper often enough.

RENATA

How did you know his ass was hairy?

JIM

I guessed it. He was the hairy-ass type.

RENATA

Isn't that an O'Neill Play, "The Hairy Ass"? Well, things might have worked out if they hadn't put him into the flap copy. "Flap copy" was never better named. It sure caused a flap in *my* life. Did you have to, Jim?

JIM

I didn't write the flap copy.

RENATA

(the book)

I mean *this*? For Christ's sake, it's been *six years*.

JIM

Six years and six months. Take your coat?

RENATA

Oh, hell, why not.

JIM

Is it still snowing?

RENATA

No, just inspissating a little. Aren't you going to offer me a drink? Your brand, our brand, blah, blah, blah. Turn up the Berlioz!

JIM

A million copies! Just for starters.

RENATA

What are you going to do, show me the check stub for your advance?

JIM

(holds up a paper)
Want to see it?

RENATA

No.

JIM

I bet you do, out of sheer masochistic self-punishment.

RENATA

(takes it and looks)
Eugh. You're a billionaire and you still live in this rathole?

JIM

I'm only here till the house in Southampton is finished. I'm hanging onto this place, though. It feeds me, like Proust's cork-lined room.

RENATA

Proust ate cork?

JIM

Okay, bad simile.

RENATA

Why stop now? Your book's chock-full of them.

JIM

Look, I don't know anything about writing novels. Luckily I get first shot at the screenplay. You thought this [*the check*] was a lot?

RENATA

Well, the barbarians are winning. I should know. I was engaged to one. Would it be vain to remind you that this scene never happened?

JIM

It could've happened.

RENATA

That's what the lox kept saying. I also do not have freckles on my tits. Or, what did you call them? Rhonda's "taut, perky breasts." Certain phrases ought to be struck regularly from the language, like gongs. Pear-shaped and/or perky breasts. Crisp cool bedsheets. Which you use not once but twice. And playwrights saying that their plays are like children. No wonder Medea killed hers.

JIM

I could draw those freckles in my sleep.

RENATA

My taut, perky breasts are freckle-free. I've checked.

JIM

Really? Maybe that wasn't you... Well, you know how I hate realism.

RENATA

Yet I do have a voice as silky as a pair of satin panties. At least a tacky novel is an advance on memory plays.

JIM

Nata, you're only bitter because of what Showtime did to your play as a movie of the week.

RENATA

Eugh.

JIM

And you talk to *me* about trash?

RENATA

I tried to poison the soap star they got to play me. Turned out she was resistant to poisons since she already had so much in her system. Not that *she* was *me*, unless you'd read the article in People that said she was me. I myself having hinted to the press that she was. The movie did do great business in Bulgaria, but only because Steven Seagal was playing you. And the dialogue, my dear, was to cringe. I sat there in the screening room *cringing* -- until I realized it was all my own dialogue. My God, were we really that smug-smug-smug and clever all the time?

JIM

We were a hymn to self-congratulation. Our own best fans.

RENATA

Banter, banter, banter. I wanted to *kill* those two. You know my friends hated us as a couple. Miranda-alias-Mandy-alias-Mindy-alias-Mimi used to call us "Fantasy Island."

JIM

Well, we don't have to worry about it now. It's funny. I never got you. But I did get the country house.

RENATA

How's it feel?

JIM

Great.

RENATA

Well I don't see a ring on your finger. What happened to your honey?

JIM

She read my trashy novel and decided I was in thrall to an obsessive relationship of many years' standing and told me to fuck off.

RENATA

You took that as a rejection?

JIM

I may have misconstrued the words. But not her tone.

RENATA

Loud. Abrasive.

JIM

Nasty.

RENATA

The bitch.

JIM

That was before the book made a mint.

RENATA

Do you miss her?

JIM

Of course. I've got a feeling we're headed back together.

RENATA

What makes you think that?

JIM

We slept together last night.

RENATA

The bitch. Is she as old as I am?

JIM

Slightly younger, by eleven years.

RENATA

Does she have perky breasts?

JIM

Pear-shaped.

RENATA

Oh, God, Jim, it's so sad. It's all so sad. Why does everything make me so sad these days? The other day the sight of an M5 bus made me cry.

JIM

Because we used to ride it.

RENATA

Because I'd been waiting for it for *forty minutes*.

JIM

(reads from BOOK)

"It seemed to him that he lived his life in a kind of snowdome, one of those little desktop globes containing a storm with artificial snowflakes. He had met her during a snowstorm and had never gotten out of it. Shake him a little—"

JIM & RENATA

"—and his eyes seemed to contain a tornado of whirling flakes."

JIM

The only true passage in the whole book. How is Miranda-alias-blah-blah?

RENATA

Her asshole husband dumped her for a bimbo. She loved your book. She thought it was profound. Jim, don't you think we deserve a break?

JIM

You mean stop all this back-and-forthing and shake hands and say goodbye?

RENATA

No, I mean why don't we stop nattering and collaborate on something?

JIM

We can't. We've run out of media.

RENATA

We could turn ourselves into an opera, but I wouldn't go to it. How about a three-D video game?

JIM

What's my percentage on the deal?

RENATA

Come on. We've known each other too long for that.

JIM

So we leave it to the lawyers?

RENATA

Exactly. I miss you, Jim.

JIM

How could you? I've been here all the time.

RENATA

Here's another idea. The hell with writing. We take our filthy earnings.

JIM

And we go somewhere.

RENATA

Yes. And--?

JIM

We drink Yugoslavian whiskey.

RENATA

Yes. Out of nostalgia. And--?

JIM

We dance.

RENATA

Yes. And--?

JIM

And. And. And. And. And. And. And. And.

RENATA

Story of my life.

(BERLIOZ COMES UP. He takes her in his arms and they dance.)

RENATA

You know it won't work out.

JIM

Nope. Never in a million years.

RENATA

That would be, what would you say...?

JIM & RENATA

Too true to life.

(And they dance on, as we hear the ROMANTIC CLOSING FILM MUSIC from the movie they've been in all along. Lights iris out on them.)

- END OF PLAY -