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# The Drama Department

By

JAMES HINDMAN

Based on a true story



**Dramatic Publishing Company**

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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*The Drama Department* was presented at Second Stage New Play Reading Series on April 22, 2015, directed by Peter Flynn.

Cast:

Rob Chalmers.....	Brooks Ashmanskas
Elyce Unger .....	Andrea Burns
Gerald Stevenson .....	Martin Moran
David Sullivan .....	Alex Sheitinger
Stuart Elliott.....	Hunter Foster
Sarah James.....	Kelsey Fowler
Barbara Sullivan.....	Jessica Molaskey

# The Drama Department

## CHARACTERS

**ROB CHALMERS:** 30s to 50s. Lead character. Rob is a very enthusiastic drama and debate teacher at Chippewa Valley High School. He is sociable, charismatic and out for the good of the student.

**DAVID SULLIVAN:** Attractive high-school student. The new kid in school, David is affable but shy, somewhat fragile. He finds a new, shaky confidence in being cast in the school play.

**GERALD STEVENSON:** 30s to mid-50s. Music teacher and tennis coach. Cautiously energetic. With the completion of the new auditorium, Gerald will finally fulfill his dream of conducting a real orchestra in a real orchestra pit. Ultimately, his religious beliefs win out over what he feels is best for the school.

**STUART ELLIOTT:** 30s to 40s. First time principal. Nervous about getting through his two years of probation, Stuart tries to be authoritative but ultimately comes off ineffectual. He will do or say anything to keep his job and the president of the school board happy.

**ELYCE UNGER:** 30s to 50s. Math teacher and best friend to Rob. Elyce loves being part of the plays at school, but after being divorced for eight years, she is ready to get back in the dating pool. She has a 10-year-old son.

**SARAH JAMES:** High-school student. Sarah is a drama student in every sense of the word. She is much more

interested in hanging out with her friends than finishing up the school year.

BARBARA SULLIVAN: 30s to 40s. Barbara is a likeable, well-mannered woman able to maintain pleasant conversation while navigating intense, overwhelming suffering. She is courteous, gracious and truly interested in Rob. Her steady, cheerful persona belies a depth of pain and self-examination that will become unrelenting in the scene and in her life.

PLACE: A small town in Kansas.

TIME: 2007.

# The Drama Department

## ACT I

### SCENE 1

*(SFX: School bell. Lights up on ROB CHALMERS addressing a group of high-school students.)*

ROB. Friends, Romans, countrymen, thespians of Chippewa Valley High School, listen up. You have just made me the happiest man on earth. I am so proud. So excited. Tell them, Mr. Stevenson ... *(Indicating to the back of the house.)* He practically had to strap me to my chair to stop me from running down and hugging every last one of you. In the sixteen years I have taught here at Chippewa Valley High School, these have been the best auditions we have ever had! A hundred and twenty seven students. Nearly a quarter of the entire student body. And all of you ... each and every one of you will take part in our fall production of the hit musical comedy, *Seussical!* *(He gets them to applaud.)* Now ... some of us are going to be disappointed—you played the lead last year—your friends have been telling you how perfect you are for a particular role ... We all want to be the lead. We all want to be the star. “Beware, my lord, the green-eyed monster for it doth mock the meat it feeds on.” We are a troupe. A company. Here to support, to rally behind! It is this attitude that will keep us number one at districts, and this year, by gosh, push us to number one in the state of Kansas!

Callbacks are tomorrow and the results will be posted Monday morning outside my door. “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and

tomorrow and tomorrow ... ” That’s four tomorrows until you can find out, so please do not call, email, text, *Facebook* or tweet me because I’m not going to tell you. I want you to feel anxious. I want you to feel vulnerable. Meryl Streep said it on a PBS special— “Two of the greatest emotions you can have in your actor tool box ... ” (*Distracted by a student in the audience.*) “Two of the greatest emotions you can have ... ” (*Referring to his watch.*) Yes, I see the time. Your mother can wait one minute, I’m talking about Meryl Streep. (*To audience.*) When you find the vulnerable place, you find your true character. Allow yourself to be open ... live in the moment. “Will I wake up to find out I’m a monkey, a talking bird ... The Cat in the Hat?!” Anxiety. Vulnerability. Two things that tell us we are alive. Standing at the precipice. “If everything in my life were to change right now, who would I be?” Remember this feeling, it will serve you well.

(*SFX: School bell.*)

ROB (*cont’d*). “’Tis the knell that summons thee to Heaven or to Hell!” And so ... adieu. (*With a slight bow, he exits.*)

## SCENE 2

(*ROB’s classroom. ELYCE UNGER and GERALD STEVENSON enter, arguing.*)

GERALD. Don’t you see what an exciting opportunity this is for the students?

ELYCE. For you, Gerald, it’s exciting for you.

GERALD. For all of us. We will finally have an orchestra.

ELYCE. Correction, we will finally have an entire theatre. We need the rest of the grant money to buy lights, drapes—we can’t afford new band instruments.

GERALD. They are not “band instruments,” they are instruments for the orchestra.

ELYCE. For the band. To be used in band class, and I wish you would just admit it.

GERALD. What’s the point of having an orchestra pit if it sits empty?

ELYCE. “Pit” as in “hole in the ground” as in “the audience can’t see you.” Conversely, if we don’t purchase lights, the audience will not see the actors.

GERALD. I’ve spent sixteen years shoved in the back corner of a gymnasium behind a black curtain.

ELYCE. And it’s been your dream to conduct the Philharmonic. Big picture, Gerald.

GERALD. What if Rob budgets the rest of the money away and there’s nothing left for me?

ELYCE. I’ll buy you a kazoo. Why don’t you give your ulcer a rest and see what the man has to say?

*(STUART ELLIOTT, the new principal at Chippewa High School, enters.)*

STUART. Where’s Rob? I’ve been waiting in the parking lot for twenty minutes.

ELYCE. He’ll be here.

GERALD. Good morning, Stuart.

STUART. Tell him to come to my office the minute he gets in.

ELYCE. Can’t you wait two minutes?

*(STUART turns to go.)*

GERALD. Good morning, Stuart.

STUART. Good morning, Gerald. *(He turns back.)* Do either of you know what time he puts up the cast paper?

ELYCE. The what?

STUART (*pulling a sheet of paper from his pocket*). The, this.  
The paper that tells the kids what part they're playing?

(*GERALD and ELYCE laugh.*)

GERALD. It's called a "cast list."

STUART. What time does he put it up?

ELYCE. He has Gerald post it after first period.

STUART. Well, don't. Don't show it to anyone. Not until after  
I talk to Rob.

ELYCE. Maybe he stopped to see his mother. He had to move  
her into a home.

GERALD (*pulling out his cigarettes*). Stuart, do you have a match?

ELYCE. I thought you quit?

GERALD. I stopped carrying matches. (*Pointedly to ELYCE.*) I  
only smoke now when people make me upset.

ELYCE. You make yourself upset.

GERALD. Can we at least buy music stands where the lights don't  
fall off? I'm tired of borrowing everything from my church.

ELYCE. That what churches are for.

STUART. Tell him to find me.

(*STUART turns to go as a bolt of fabric is thrown through  
the door, unrolling itself along the floor. ELYCE screams with  
delight.*)

ELYCE. Ahhhhhh!

GERALD. He's here.

(*ROB enters carrying bags of material.*)

ROB. Our kingdom shall be saved!

ELYCE. It's perfect! (*Rushes to the material.*) You have made me the happiest woman in all of Chippewa Valley!

ROB. Forty-five minutes I spent waiting for JoAnn's Fabric to open so I could return a cotton brocade that doesn't move.

STUART. Rob? ...

ROB. I needed polyester! Who knew those words would ever pass these lips?

GERALD. Rob, if we could discuss how the rest of the grant money is going to be spent ...

ELYCE (*dancing with material against her body*). It practically dances by itself! (*To STUART.*) We want the three singing birds to look like The Supremes.

GERALD. And if we want them to sound like the Supremes, we need to buy more instruments. Rob—the orchestra is an integral part of a musical.

ELYCE. So are lights and sound.

GERALD. It's called a "musical," not a "lightical" or a "soundical."

STUART. Rob?

ROB. One second. (*To GERALD and ELYCE.*) I have an announcement! Hear ye, hear ye! I stayed up all night and have decided how I am going to spend the rest of the "grant monies."

GERALD. Rob, before you say anything ...

ROB. And, Elyce ... sixty-five percent of it will be used to decorate the lobby ...

ELYCE (*quietly*). Yes!

GERALD. Decorate the lobby?!

ROB. And ...

GERALD. Is that why you didn't want him spending money on my instruments?

ROB. And ...

ELYCE. I don't appreciate your tone.

GERALD. Don't you talk to me about "tone," I'm a musician.

ROB (*to GERALD*). AND ... the other thirty-five percent will be spent to buy a few, badly needed instruments for our orchestra.

GERALD. Thank you. Thank you, very much, Rob. (*To ELYCE, mocking.*) Yes!

ELYCE. Hold this.

*(ELYCE hands GERALD a piece of material as they walk away. STUART pulls ROB aside.)*

STUART. Look ... You have to change the casting.

ROB. What are you talking about?

STUART. You didn't give Greg Barnes the role of the Cat in the Hat.

ROB. No, he's going to play Horton the Elephant.

STUART. I'm not sure you know who Greg Barn's father is?

*(ROB notices ELYCE draping the material to the floor.)*

ROB. I want it just below the knees. Early '60s. YouTube Diana Ross on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

STUART. He happens to be the head of the school board.

ROB. Ted Barnes. I know very well who he is.

STUART. He's my boss.

GERALD (*to ROB*). What if these kids don't know who The Supremes are?

ELYCE. They know Beyonce.

STUART. He called me this morning to find out if his son was cast as the Cat in the Hat.

ROB. And you told him? Stuart, I emailed you that list as a formality.

STUART. What was I supposed to say?

ROB. No one gives out that information but me.

STUART. The guy hit the roof.

ROB. Greg has played the lead in nearly every production since the seventh grade.

STUART. He wants to give his son one more chance to win the best actor award.

ROB. This time someone else was better suited for the part. That's how the theatre works.

STUART. The guy built you a new auditorium; all he is asking is that you give his son the lead in the play.

GERALD. He what?

ELYCE. Wait a minute ... Ted Barnes told you he built the auditorium?

STUART. He put it on the ballot.

GERALD. After the town forced him to. We picketed outside the superintendent's office for three weeks, in the middle of winter.

ELYCE. They were tired of giving money to a football team that never wins.

GERALD. This drama department is the only thing the school has going for it.

ELYCE. It's the only thing this town has going for it.

GERALD. Desoto has sports, Duncanville has brains, we have drama. If it wasn't for Rob, we'd have nothing.

ELYCE. Gerald, that's a terrible thing to say. We have a wonderful tennis team.

GERALD. Doubles. We have a wonderful doubles team. We stink in singles.

ELYCE. Gerald ...

GERALD. I can say that. I'm the coach.

ROB. If anyone built us a new auditorium, it was the taxpayers.

ELYCE. A 1.5 million Capital Improvement Bond for Chippewa Valley High School.

GERALD. Slam dunk!

*(GERALD, ELYCE and ROB give each other a high-five.)*

STUART. That really isn't the point ...

ELYCE. Call Mr. Reno; he'll tell you.

STUART. Mr. Reno is no longer the principal of this school, I am. *(Referring to a piece of paper.)* Who is David Sullivan anyway?

ELYCE. He's new.

STUART. You gave the lead role to a kid you don't even know?

ROB. Stuart, I had to give Greg Barnes the role of the elephant. David Sullivan is skinny. Greg Barnes, on the other hand, is husky.

GERALD. He's imposing.

ELYCE. He's fat. It's type casting.

STUART. I'm taking a lot of heat over this grant money. Every department has their hand out. Coach Ladrass is begging for a new weight room.

ELYCE. So the football team can lose with bigger muscles?

STUART. Barnes is calling me back in ten minutes.

ROB. Advice for the new guy—don't get sucked in. Tell Mr. Barnes it is out of your jurisdiction.

STUART. But it is my jurisdiction ... I'm the principal.

(*ROB shrugs.*)

STUART (*cont'd*). I thought this place was going to be easy.  
A tiny little high school in the middle of nowhere.

ROB. It is, Stuart. It's very easy. And very rewarding. And the fact that it's a tiny town actually makes it all the harder because there isn't a lot else to think about. Stuart ... we are about to embark on the most important production of our careers. I am about to direct, for the first time in all my years here, in a real theatre. We have a brilliant cast. (*Referring to GERALD.*) We have a wonderful musical director who will finally fulfill his dream of conducting an entire orchestra! With some brand new instruments!

GERALD. Two oboes and a clarinet. And, please God, a cello.

ROB (*referring to ELYCE.*) We have a superb associate director—slash associate costume designer—slash assistant choreographer—slash right hand ...

ELYCE. Slash left hand ... slash both wrists ...

ROB. This “tiny little high school in the middle of nowhere” ... Sixteen years ago, when I started here, do you know how many kids auditioned for the musical? Three. Three kids auditioned.

GERALD. We were stuck doing *I Do! I Do!* (*Holding up two fingers.*) Two characters.

ROB. In sixteen years we have come home with so many trophies they've had to build another display case. Every high school in the state quakes when we walk in the room. Pride. Loyalty. Confidence. That's what we've brought to this school. And in my hand ... (*He presents a manila envelope.*) An application for the Jester Award for best production of a high-school musical in the entire state of Kansas!

ELYCE. Oh, Rob.

ROB. In six months, the state trophy will be sitting outside your office. A photo of you cradling it in your arms will appear in every newspaper in the district. You'll have so many feathers in your cap you'll look like Sitting Bull.

STUART. If he comes to the school, I'm sending him to you.

ROB. As a high-school student, I had to deal with bullies. As a teacher, I do not.

STUART. He's a very persuasive man.

ROB. So am I.

STUART. He has a lot of power in this town.

ROB. So does this department. (*Grabbing his things.*) "Parting is such sweet sorrow." I am off to paint Whoville over Anatevka. "Act well thy part, oh principal; for there thy honor lies." (*Handing GERALD the cast list.*) Post it after class.

*(ROB exits. ELYCE follows.)*

STUART. I should have stayed a teacher.

GERALD. Why didn't you?

STUART. I hate teaching.

*(GERALD exits. STUART follows.)*

STUART (*cont'd*). Don't post the list. Give me three hours.