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Dramatic Publishing

Rosemary Frisino Toohey

IN THE TANK



IN THE TANK

Comedy. By Rosemary Frisino Toohey. Cast: 2m. or 2w. or 1m., 1w. What's it like to be peered at by hungry humans? Studied like a microbe under a glass? Or worst of all, chosen to be someone's dinner entree? Such is the predicament of Harry and Stu, two lobsters who find themselves in the tank of a seafood restaurant. Harry is a crustacean who's been around the tank a few times. He's cleverly devised a "dead" act. Frozen in position, starey-eyed, claws rigidly akimbo, the "dead" pose is meant to ward off hungry diners and send them scurrying off to order the stuffed flounder or the filet of sole. Enter Stu, a lobster of a more philosophical bent. When Harry explains the rationale behind his "act," Stu observes, "If you spend all your time acting like you're dead, what's the point of being alive?" Harry's not exactly a deep thinker, but he knows that if he doesn't try to fool the humans on the other side of the glass, he'll end up in the stewpot or the broiler; people are the ones who hold the dreaded tongs. But Stu reveals a little-known theory: humans are in a tank, too, and they face their own risks. They won't end up impaled on little forks, but they sometimes do stupid things that bring about their own destruction. Unlike animals empowered by instinct, humans must choose. For some, Stu says, it's a recipe for disaster. Why? Because they're afraid. The lobsters consider the idea that humans are really afraid of them. Maybe that's why people keep them bound up in rubber bands. So what's going to happen to the two priciest items on the menu? "None there be can rehearse the whole tale," says Stu, quoting a line from a Dead Sea Scroll. "One thing's certain," Harry says. "If the day ever comes when lobsters have dominion over people they're going to need an awful lot of rubber bands." *Bare stage. Approximate running time: 25 minutes.*

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By
ROSEMARY FRISINO TOOHEY



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and

Originally produced by Moving Arts, Los Angeles, California,
Kimberly Glann, artistic director.

IN THE TANK had its premiere performance at Fells Point Corner Theatre, Baltimore, Maryland, August 9, 2001 with the following cast:

Harry	Mike Moran
Stu	Paul Craley

Mike Moran was the director, Celia Lourens, was the producer.

IN THE TANK

A One-act Play
For 2 Actors *

CHARACTERS

HARRY (or) LIZ: A down-to-earth, pragmatic sort, of no particular age. A creature inclined to action rather than introspection, one who ekes out a living as best he or she can, dealing with the realities of the moment. Happens to be a lobster.

STU (or) ANGELA: A fairly philosophical type who observes much and ponders even more. Though moving through a world that is well beyond his or her control, this individual manages to maintain a positive outlook on life. Also a lobster.

* NOTES: The two roles can be played by:
two men
or two women...
or one man and one woman

Costuming can be minimal or elaborate. The one requirement: prominent bands around the hands of both actors like the rubber bands on a lobster's claws in a tank.

TIME: The present.

SETTING: Interior of a lobster tank at a seafood restaurant.

Two lobsters find themselves in a tank at a seafood restaurant. One "plays dead" to avoid being eaten by hungry diners, while the other takes a more philosophical approach to their plight.

STU. You really do have a them-against-us mentality.

HARRY. Because it's THEM against US!

STU. But they're human, remember? They've got dominion. You know, birds of the air, fish of the sea?

HARRY. And that makes it okay? What am I supposed to do, hold my claws out and say "cook me"? Where's your will to live? Your fighting spirit? Or are you the kind that doesn't have any?

STU. I've got plenty of spirit. I simply will not stoop to pretending to be dead.

HARRY. Well, I'll stoop. I'll stoop all right. Makes more sense than what you're doing. Why don't you just hang a sign on that claw: "Good eatin' starts here!"

STU. Well, it does. Are you aware we have the tastiest meat in the—

HARRY. Whoa! Do not refer to my insides as "meat"! Enough's enough. You want to be the blue-plate special, that's up to you. Me? I got other plans.

(HARRY resumes his "dead" pose. A pause. STU studies HARRY for a moment. Then, STU shrugs and begins to hum Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." Gradually he gets more into the music, growing more and more animated. As he does, HARRY begins to fume. Then...)

HARRY (*holding the “dead” pose, talks out of the side of his mouth*). Will you knock it off?

STU. Why? Am I bothering you?

HARRY (*same as above*). Yes, you’re bothering me! I am trying to go on living over here. Can you get that?

STU. Oh. Call that living, do you?

HARRY (*same as above*). What do you— (*Breaks his “dead” pose, speaks normally.*) Yes! I call it living.

STU. Forgive me, but it doesn’t look like what one would do, IF one actually had a life.

HARRY. You’re saying I got no life?

STU. I’m saying, what kind of a life is it, if it looks like a death? Or, to put it another way, if you spend all your time acting like you’re dead, what’s the point of being alive? (*Pause.*)

HARRY. That’s...that’s too much for somebody like me to figure out. I don’t know why I...I...

STU. Then, if you don’t know why you’re doing it, why do you do it?

HARRY. Will you stop with the questions? I do it because, because...because if I don’t... (*HARRY points to the audience.*) They’re going to bring an end to me. See? There. That’s why I do it. They’re holding all the cards.

STU. Cards?

HARRY. All right, tongs, then. Anytime they want to, they can pick ’em up and then I’m dead meat.

STU. I thought you didn’t like that word.

HARRY. I am trying to make a point. Which you don’t seem to get. They are in charge. And they can do anything they—

STU. Take it easy, my friend. Haven’t you heard the theory?

HARRY. What?

STU. The theory. About them. Once you accept it, our situation becomes easier to take.

HARRY. What are you talking about? What theory?

STU. Why don't you listen and I'll explain it to you? Just hear me out.

HARRY. Okay, okay. I'll listen to your cockamamy theory but only because I'm tired of—

STU (*conspiratorially*). They're in a tank, too.

HARRY. What?

STU. They're in a tank. Just like we are.

HARRY. No!

STU. Oh, yes.

HARRY. Where is it? I don't see anything out there.

STU. Of course you don't. It's much bigger than this thing.

HARRY. But how does it work? What's the setup like?

STU. Well, as I said, it's quite sizeable. The strange thing is, we know we're in a tank. They don't.

HARRY. But—

STU. That's not all. We know we have a limited amount of time, right?

HARRY. Well, sure. Any minute now, it could be sayonara, Harry.

STU. Get this. They behave as if they're going to be around forever, and then one day, zap.

HARRY. Zap?

STU. And no matter how many times they see it happen, they're never ready.

HARRY. Come on! They're supposed to be smart.

STU. I know. It's bizarre, but they always think it's someone else's turn.

HARRY. Wow! That's dumb. So, do they get tossed into boiling water and eaten with little forks?

STU. No. The end result is the same, though. Mostly they carry within them the seeds of their own destruction.

HARRY. Huh?

STU. They do stupid things. Sometimes they invent stupid things.

HARRY. Like what?

STU. Oh, like, plastic explosives, .357 magnums, unbuckled seat belts, frozen margaritas, atom bombs, Lucky Strikes, breast implants, separating tire treads, thick steaks, toxic waste, crack cocaine, too much aerosol, not enough sunblock, six-packs of lager in twenty-ounce cans—

HARRY. How come they never figure all that stuff out?

STU. That's easy. See, you and I and every other living thing, we all have something they haven't got.

HARRY. What?

STU (*very fast*). An inherited, basically unalterable tendency to make a complex, yet very specific response to environmental stimuli without involving reason. (*Pause.*)

HARRY. Could you try using little words?

STU. Sorry. Instinct. We have lots and lots of instincts.

HARRY. And they don't?

STU. Uh-huh. Just brains. Lots of brains. The way I see it, there wasn't any room left for instincts after they put in all the brains. See, instincts automatically tell you many things.

HARRY. You mean, like something bigger than us is in charge?

STU. Exactly. We just naturally get that.

In the Tank

HARRY. Hey! I'll bet because they got that brain thing going, they think they're in charge.

STU. Correct.

HARRY. Hmmh. So, they've got no instincts at all?

STU. Well, there is one major exception. The basic plan had to be altered to make sure there would be enough of them to go around. They did get the mating instinct but it was wedged in, sort of, added on at the last minute? And feature this. When that kicks in, their brains shut down completely.

HARRY. Huh. So they can't mate and think at the same time?

STU. It's a physical impossibility. They get to do one or the other. Never both simultaneously.

HARRY. Whoa! The screw-ups that must lead to! And I always thought they had it made.

STU. The seaweed always looks greener in the other tank.

HARRY. But why do they end up with the forks and we end up on the plates? Why do humans always get to pick and choose?

STU. My friend, you put your claw right on it. They choose. Not just us. They choose everything. They have to decide what to do every day.

HARRY. So? How hard can that be?

STU. Some of them are careless about it and they choose the wrong things. Some of them are too careful and they don't choose enough. Some of them get so hung up on choosing, they end up doing nothing at all. And some of them, well, some of them are just...afraid.

HARRY. Come on!

STU. No, really. Frankly, I'm not sure I'd like to make all those decisions. With instinct, all we do is—

HARRY. Go with our gut?

STU. You express your self very directly.