



By Christopher Durang

Directed by Jonathan Heath

Synopsis: An accountant finds himself backstage at a theatre, presumably during a dream, and discovers that everyone sees him as George, the understudy to Eddie who has broken both legs in a car accident. The remainder of the play wanders through four different plays (*Private Lives*, by Noël Coward, *Hamlet*, a fictitious Samuel Beckett play called *Checkmate*, and *A Man for All Seasons*, by Robert Bolt) with George winging it through each scene without knowing any of his lines. This is a classic farce, “a form of comedy that relies on exaggerated, improbable, or ridiculous situations to entertain an audience.” Similar examples: *Noises Off*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *The Play That Goes Wrong*.

Cast: 3 women, 2 men (line count in parentheses)

- George (129) – a man who finds himself backstage under mysterious circumstances. He appears to be an accountant and seems to be the understudy of a man named Edwin, although he cannot actually remember attending any rehearsals or being a part of the production. In *Private Lives* he plays Elyot. In *Hamlet* he plays Prince Hamlet. In *Checkmate* he plays Willie (who seems to be based on Nagg in *Endgame*). In *A Man for All Seasons* he plays Sir Thomas More.
- Meg (26) – the stage manager. A capable worker. When it becomes apparent that George does not know many of his lines, she pretends to be a maid in the production and whispers some to him. In the scene from *A Man for all Seasons*, she plays the part of Sir Thomas More's daughter.
- Sarah (68) – a grand actress. In *Private Lives*, she plays Amanda. In *Hamlet*, she plays Queen Gertrude. In *A Man for all Seasons*, she plays Sir Thomas More's wife (she also quotes *Hamlet* in that scene, when trying to convince George to accept the execution and bids him goodbye as "Hamlet").
- Ellen (40) – another actress, but not as grand as Sarah. In *Private Lives* she plays Sybil. In *Checkmate*, her character is unnamed, but she appears to be a cross between Winnie (from *Happy Days*) and Nell (from *Endgame*). She remains in this character throughout the *A Man for all Seasons* scene.
- Henry (18) – a grand actor. In *Hamlet*, he plays the part of Horatio. According to the script, Henry is also able to play the part of the executioner.
- The Executioner (9) – he makes an appearance only in *A Man for All Seasons*. This part can be played by the same actor as Henry.

The Actor's Nightmare was first presented by Playwrights Horizons in New York City on a double bill with *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You* on October 14, 1981. The production was directed by Jerry Zaks, set design by Karen Schulz, costume design by William Ivey Long, lighting design by Paul Gallo, sound design by Aural Fixation; production stage manager was Esther Cohen. The cast was as follows:

GEORGE SPELVIN
MEG, the stage manager
SARAH SIDDONS
DAME ELLEN TERRY
HENRY IRVING

Jeff Brooks
Polly Draper
Elizabeth Franz
Mary Catherine Wright
Timothy Landfield

During the subsequent run of *The Actor's Nightmare* and *Sister Mary Ignatius*, the following actors also joined the production: as Meg in *Actor's* and Diane in *Sister*, Carolyn Mignini, Brenda Currin; as Sarah and Sister Mary, Nancy Marchand; as Ellen and Philomena, Deborah Rush, Alice Playten, Cynthia Darlow; as Henry and Gary, Jeff Hayenga, Mark Herrier; and as Thomas in *Sister*, Evan Sandman, Guy Paris Thompson.

George /
Meg

SCENE: *Basically an empty stage, maybe with a few set pieces on it or around it.*

GEORGE SPELVIN, *a young man (twenty to thirty), wanders in. He looks baffled and uncertain about where he is.*

Enter MEG, the stage manager. In jeans and sweat shirt, perhaps, pleasant, efficient, age twenty-five to thirty probably.

GEORGE: Oh, I'm sorry. I don't know how I got in here.

MEG: Oh thank goodness you're here. I've been calling you.

GEORGE: Pardon?

MEG: An awful thing has happened. Eddie's been in a car accident, and you'll have to go on for him.

GEORGE: Good heavens, how awful. Who's Eddie?

MEG: Eddie. (*He looks blank.*) Edwin. You have to go on for him.

GEORGE: On for him.

MEG: Well he can't go on. He's been in a car accident.

GEORGE: Yes I understood that part. But what do you mean "go on for him"?

MEG: You play the part. Now I know you haven't had a chance to rehearse it exactly, but presumably you know your lines, and you've certainly seen it enough.

GEORGE: I don't understand. Do I know you?

MEG: George, we really don't have time for this kind of joshing. Half-hour.

Sarah /
George

- START -

arang Explains It All for You

SARAH: Extraordinary how potent cheap music is.

GEORGE: What?

SARAH: Extraordinary how potent cheap music is.

GEORGE: Yes, that's true. Am I supposed to be Hamlet?

SARAH (*alarmed; then going on*): Whose yacht do you think that is?

GEORGE: Where?

SARAH: The duke of Westminster, I expect. It always is.

GEORGE: Ah, well, perhaps. To be or not to be. I don't know any more of it.

(She looks irritated at him; then she coughs three times. He unzips her dress; she slaps him.)

SARAH: Elyot, please. We are on our honeymoons.

GEORGE: Are we?

SARAH: Yes. (*Irritated, being over-explicit.*) Me with Victor, and you with Sibyl.

GEORGE: Ah.

SARAH: Tell me about Sibyl.

GEORGE: I've never met her.

SARAH: Ah, Elyot, you're so amusing. You're married to Sibyl. Tell me about her.

GEORGE: Nothing much to tell really. She's sort of non-descript, I'd say.

SARAH: I bet you were going to say that she's just like Lady Bundle, and that she has several chins, and one blue

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eye and one brown eye, and a third eye in the center of her forehead. Weren't you?

GEORGE: Yes. I think so.

SARAH: Victor's like that, too. (*Long pause.*) I bet you were just about to tell me that you traveled around the world.

GEORGE: Yes I was. I traveled around the world.

SARAH: How was it?

GEORGE: The world?

SARAH: Yes.

GEORGE: Oh, very nice.

SARAH: I always feared the Taj Mahal would look like a biscuit box. Did it?

GEORGE: Not really.

SARAH (*she's going to give him the cue again*): I always feared the Taj Mahal would look like a biscuit box. Did it?

GEORGE: I guess it did.

SARAH (*again*): I always feared the Taj Mahal would look like a biscuit box. Did it?

GEORGE: Hard to say. What brand biscuit box?

SARAH: I always feared the Taj Mahal would look like a biscuit box. Did it? (*Pause.*) Did it? Did it?

GEORGE: I wonder whose yacht that is out there.

SARAH: Did it? Did it? Did it? Did it?

(Enter MEG. She's put on an - STOP -

GEORGE: I choose . . . Oh God, I don't know my lines. I don't know how I got here. I wish I *weren't* here. I wish I had joined the monastery like I almost did right after high school. I almost joined, but then I didn't.

SARAH (*trying to cover*): Oh, Elyot, your malaria is acting up again and you're ranting. Come, come, who do you choose, me or that baggage over there.

ELLEN: You're the baggage, not I. Yes, Elyot, who do you choose?

GEORGE: I choose . . . (*To SARAH:*) I'm sorry, what is your name?

SARAH: Amanda.

GEORGE: I choose Amanda. I think that's what he does in the play.

ELLEN: Very well. I can accept defeat gracefully. I don't think I'll send this letter to your mother. She has a loud voice and an overbearing manner and I don't like her taste in tea china. I hope, Elyot, that when you find me hanging from the hotel lobby chandelier with my eyes all bulged out and my tongue hanging out, that you'll be very, very sorry. Goodbye.

(*Exits.*)

SARAH: What a dreadful sport she is.

GEORGE (*doing his best to say something his character might*): Poor Sibyl. She's going to hang herself.

SARAH: Some women should be hung regularly, like tapestries. Oh who cares? Whose yacht do you think that is?

GEORGE (*remembering*): The duke of Westminster, I exp . . .

SARAH (*furious*): How dare you mention that time in Mozambique? (*Slaps him.*) Oh, darling, I'm sorry. (*Moving her cigarette grandly.*) I love you madly!

GEORGE (*gasps*): I've inhaled your cigarette ash. (*He coughs three times.* SARAH looks confused, then unzips the front of his Hamlet doublet. He looks confused, then slaps her. She slaps him back with a vengeance. They both look confused.)

SARAH: There, we're not angry anymore, are we? Oh, Elyot, wait for me here and I'll pack my things and we'll run away together before Victor gets back. Oh, darling, isn't it extraordinary how potent cheap music can be?

Henry / George

- START -

se on her exit. GEORGE
n turns back to face the
taken again; GEORGE
ghts change, the sound
ENRY IRVING, dressed in
; and bows grandly to

HENRY: Hail to your Lordship!

GEORGE: Oh hello. Are you Victor?

HENRY: The same, my Lord, and your poor servant ever.

GEORGE: This doesn't sound like Noel Coward.

HENRY: A truant disposition, good my Lord.

GEORGE: You're not Victor, are you?

HENRY: My Lord, I came to see your father's funeral.

GEORGE: Oh yes? And how was it?

HENRY: Indeed, my Lord, it followed hard upon.

GEORGE: Hard upon? Yes, I see.

(Enter MEG.)

Oh, good, the maid. (He rushes to her. She whispers his line to him, which he dutifully reiterates.) Thrift, thrift, Horatio. The funeral baked meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.

(MEG exits.)

What does that mean?? (Looks off after the disappearing MEG.) Ah, she's gone already.

HENRY: My Lord, I think I saw him yesternight.

GEORGE: Did you? Who?

HENRY: My Lord, the king your father.

GEORGE: The king my father?

HENRY: Season your admiration for a while with an attent ear till I may deliver upon the witness of these gentlemen this marvel to you.

GEORGE: I see. I'm Hamlet now, right?

HENRY: Sssh! (Rattling this off in a very Shakespearean way.)

Two nights together had these gentlemen,
Marcellus and Bernardo, on their watch
In the dead waste and middle of the night
Been thus encountered. A figure like your father,
Arméd at point exactly, cap-a-pe,
Appears before them and with solemn march
Goes slow and stately by them. Thrice he walked

By their oppressed and fear-surprised eyes
Within his truncheon's length, whilst they, distilled
Almost to jelly with the act of fear,
Stand dumb and speak not to him. This to me
In dreadful secrecy impart they did,
And I with them the third night kept the watch,
Where, as they had delivered, both in time,
Form of the thing, each word made true and good,
The apparition comes. I knew your father.
These hands are not more like.

GEORGE: Oh, my turn? Most strange and wondrous tale you tell, Horatio. It doth turn my ear into a very . . . (at a loss) merry . . . bare bodkin.

- STOP -

nored lord, 'tis true,
t writ down in our duty
it.

ry much. (Pause.)

HENRY: Oh yes, my Lord. He wore his beaver up.

GEORGE: His beaver up. He wore his beaver up. And does he usually wear it down?

HENRY: A countenance more in sorrow than in anger.

GEORGE: Well I am sorry to hear that. My father was a king of much renown. A favorite . . . (suddenly finds himself unable to rhyme) . . . amongst all in London town! (Delighted with himself, he grins at audience, then realizes there's a problem.) And in Denmark.

HENRY: I war'nt it will.

(Sings:) Brush up your Shakespeare; start quoting him now; da da . . .

(Lights change again. That spot goes off; another one comes on, center stage, though closer to audience. GEORGE moves into that.)

I wonder whose yacht that is. How was China? Very large, China. How was Japan? Very small, Japan.

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all.

Line! Line! Oh my God. (Gets idea.)

O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended thee, and I detest all my sins because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell. But most of all because they offend thee, my God, who art all good and deserving of all my love. And I resolve to confess my sins, to do penance, and to amend my life, Amen. (Friendly.) That's the act of contrition that Catholic schoolchildren say in confession in order to be forgiven their sins. Catholic adults say it too, I imagine. I don't know any Catholic adults.

Line! (Explaining:) When you call for a line, the stage manager normally gives you your next line, to refresh your memory.

Line!

The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain upon the place below, when we have shuffled off this mortal coil.

Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him well. Get thee to a nunnery.

Line. Nunnery. As a child, I was taught by nuns, and then in high school I was taught by Benedictine priests. I really rather liked the nuns, they were sort of warm, though they were fairly crazy too.

Line.

I liked the priests also. The school was on the grounds of the monastery, and my junior and senior years I spent a few weekends joining in the daily routine of the monastery—prayers, then breakfast, then prayers, then lunch, then prayers, then dinner, then prayers, then sleep. I found the predictability quite attractive. And the food was good. I was going to join the monastery after high school, but they said I was too young and should wait. And then I just stopped. . . . so I never did join the monas-

- START -

. I've studied logarithms, and

(Furious and despairing:) Line! (Totally defeated, apologetic:) I'm sorry. This is supposed to be *Hamlet* or *Private Lives* or something, and I keep rattling on like a maniac. I really do apologize. I just can't recall attending a *single* rehearsal. I can't imagine what I was doing.

And also you come expecting to see Edwin Booth and you get me. I really am very embarrassed. (Weakly:) Sorry. (Pleading, looks up to heaven:) Line. (No response from heaven.) I have always depended upon the kindness of strangers. (Yells in the same tone of voice he has yelled for "line":) STELLA! (Laughs weakly.) 'Tis a far, far better thing I do now than I have ever done before, 'tis a far, far better place I go to than I have ever been before. (Sings the alphabet song.) A, B, C, D, E, F, G; H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P; Q, R, S, T . . .

(As he starts to sing, enter I - STOP -
two large garbage cans. She
gets in one.)

Oh, good. Are you Opheli

(She points to the other gar
should get in it.)

- START -

rang Explains It All for You

Get in? Okay. (*He does.*) This must be one of those modern *Hamlets*.

(*Lights change abruptly to "Beckett lighting."*)

ELLEN: Nothing to be done. Pause. Pause. Wrinkle nose. (*Wrinkles nose.*) Nothing to be done.

GEORGE: I guess you're not Ophelia.

ELLEN: We'll just wait. Pause. Either he'll come, pause pause pause, or he won't.

GEORGE: That's a reasonable attitude. Are we, on a guess, waiting for Godot?

ELLEN: No, Willie. He came already and was an awful bore. Yesterday he came. Garlic on his breath, telling a lot of unpleasant jokes about Jews and Polacks and stewardesses. He was just dreadful, pause, rolls her eyes upward. (*She rolls her eyes upward.*)

GEORGE: Well I am sorry to hear that. Pause. So who are we waiting for?

ELLEN: We're waiting for Lefty.

GEORGE: Ah. And is he a political organizer or something, I seem to recall?

ELLEN: Yes, dear, he is a political organizer. He's always coming around saying get involved, get off your behind and organize, fight the system, do this, do that, uh, he's exhausting, he's worse than Jane Fonda. And he has garlic breath just like Godot, I don't know which of them is worse, and I hope neither of them ever comes here again. Blinks left eye, blinks right eye, closes eyes, opens them. (*Does this.*)

GEORGE: So we're really not waiting for anyone, are we?

ELLEN: No, dear, we're not. It's just another happy day, pause, smile, pause, picks nit from head. (*Picks nit from head.*)

GEORGE: Do you smell something?

ELLEN: That's not your line. Willie doesn't have that many lines. (*Louder.*) Oh, Willie, how talkative you are this morning!

GEORGE: There seems to be some sort of muck at the bottom of this garbage can.

ELLEN: Mustn't complain, Willie. There's muck at the bottom of everyone's garbage can. Count your blessings, Willie. I do. (*Counts to herself, eyes closed.*) One. Two. Three. Are you counting, Willie?

GEORGE: I guess so.

ELLEN: I'm up to three. Three is my eyesight. (*Opens her eyes.*) Oh my God, I've gone blind. I can't see, Willie. Oh my God. Oh what a terrible day. Oh dear. Oh my. (*Suddenly very cheerful again.*) Oh well. Not so bad really. I only used my eyes occasionally. When I wanted to see something. But no more!

stop
v this play at all.

ngs, Willie. Let me hear you

o. Three. That's my eyesight.

ig. Five, that's my . . . Master

ELLEN: Did you say God, Willie?

GEORGE: No.