

INTERMISSION received its world premiere at Actors Theatre of Louisville Shorts Festival (Jon Jory, Producing Director), in Louisville, Kentucky, in November, 1981. It was directed by Frazier W. Marsh. The cast was as follows:

BillMichael Kevin
SteveBruce Kuhn
SamAndy Backer
JohnRandle Mell

INTERMISSION

The set is the anteroom of Jonathan Davis's Dressing Room at the Queens Theatre, a mid-sized Broadway house. For furniture there is a couch, two armchairs, and a watercooler. On the wall is a monitor box with a single dial that is both ON/OFF and a volume control. There are two or three flower arrangements which are drooping a little, and a bottle of champagne with a red ribbon around the neck.

Up left is the door that leads to the dressing room proper. Down right is the door that leads to the hallway and the stairs which connect this level to the backstage floor.

The stage is in darkness. There is a figure lying on the couch, his back to the audience.

There is a quiet knock on the door.

STEVE. *(Outside.)* Mr. Howard? *(There is no response from the figure on the couch. The door opens and Steve sticks his head inside.)* Mr. Howard? *(Still no response. Seeing the lights are out, Steve hits the switch.)* Mr. Howard?

BILL. Jesus Christ! *(The figure on the couch rolls over shading his eyes. He is William Howard, a well-dressed man in his early thirties. He fumbles for a pair of lightly tinted aviator glasses on the coffee table.)* Turn off the damn light.

STEVE. Sorry, sir. *(Steve turns the lights off. Bill finds his glasses and puts them on. He pulls out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter and lights up.)*

BILL. It's all right, you can turn 'em on now. What time is it?

STEVE. They have another ten minutes to go, sir. Can I get you anything?

BILL. Turn the monitor on would you ... uh ... what's your name again?

STEVE. Steven Lowell. *(Steve turns the monitor on.)*

BILL. Right. Steve.

MONITOR VOICE. "... They are friends, Ratcliff and Lowell."

"Here is the head of that ignoble traitor, the dangerous and unsuspected Hastings."

"So dear I loved the man, that I must weep. I took him for the plainest harmless creature that breathe upon the earth, a Christian: Made him my book, wherein my soul recorded the history of all her secret thoughts: so smooth he daubed his vice with show of virtue, that, his apparent open guilt ..."

BILL. On second thought, turn it off. *(Steve does so.)*

STEVE. Anything else, Mr. Howard?

BILL. You got time to go around the corner, get me a cup of real coffee?

STEVE. Midtown deli, okay?

BILL. Beautiful. Get me a Danish, too, huh?

STEVE. Any special kind?

BILL. Something not over a week old. Most of what they got there, you could hang at the Met.

STEVE. See what I can do. I gotta help with the change-over, so it'll take me ten or fifteen minutes.

BILL. Whenever. Hit the light on your way out, would you?

STEVE. Yes, sir. *(Steve turns the lights off and closes the door.)*

Bill sits smoking in the dark. Pause The door suddenly opens and Sam Solstein enter. He is a short, heavy-set, bearded man in his mid to late forties. He wears a simple, rumpled sports jacket and tie. He turns on the light. He and Bill stare at each other.)

BILL. Sam. Long time no see.

SAM. Well, I've been lucky recently. *(Sam walks over to the watercooler and gets a drink.)* You always sit in the dark?

BILL. Only when I want to be alone.

SAM. Well, don't let me bother you.

BILL. I won't. *(Beat.)* Want a cigarette?

SAM. I quit.

BILL. No kidding? Your choice or economic necessity?

SAM. Blood pressure, actually. Doctor said I gotta get it down.

BILL. Take care of yourself, Sammie. Your death would be a great loss to the American Theatre.

SAM. And a great personal loss for you as well?

BILL. Goes without saying.

SAM. Then don't.

BILL. What?

SAM. Say it.

BILL. How'd you do it?

SAM. Do what?

BILL. Kick the habit.

SAM. Smoke-enders.

BILL. They use the hypnotist?

SAM. No. I considered that. But it's so hard to get an appointment with you these days. *(Beat.)*

BILL. What are you doing here, Sammie?

SAM. What do you mean? I put down my forty-five dollars like everybody else.

BILL. Forty-five dollars gets you a seat in the house like everybody else; what are you doing backstage?

SAM. You having security problems, Bill?

BILL. The midtown slasher could walk in here and ask for a new razor blade and all this doorman would want to know is, "Shick, Gillette, or Wilkinson, sir?"

SAM. *(Mock hurt.)* I know we were never exactly what you'd call friends, Bill, but to include me in the same category as this week's crazy ... surely you exaggerate.

BILL. Cut the crap, Sammie, I want to know how you got backstage and what you're doing here.

SAM. You mustn't blame the staff, Bill. Lou Tolan and I are old fishing buddies. Ten years in the wilds of Minnesota being dinner for the same group of black flies carries a lot of weight. I have a standing offer to visit his productions.

BILL. Even if that were true, which I doubt, my erstwhile

co-producer would still have to usher you in personally and that's not possible as he has temporarily jumped ship and is sunning himself in Aruba as we speak.

SAM. Not a bad idea considering what I saw of the first act.

BILL. *(Crossing to the monitor.)* Don't make me have you thrown out, Sam. The very great personal pleasure that would give me would more than compensate for whatever negative publicity might ensue.

SAM. I have an invitation, actually. *(Pause.)*

BILL. From Johnny?

SAM. Ahh. Very well done, Sherlock. What gave me away? Was it the mud on me Mac, the strange linear calluses on my left hand, or the fact that I'm sitting in his dressing room?

BILL. I suppose you have that invitation in writing.

SAM. Of course. Don't you trust me?

BILL. *(Extending his hand.)* Of course. *(Sam unfolds paper from his pocket and holds it up so Bill can read it. When Bill reaches for it, Sam withdraws the note.)* Don't you trust me?

SAM. Of course.

BILL. What does Johnny want with you?

SAM. I gather he wants to talk to me.

BILL. Professionally or personally?

SAM. It's so hard to separate the two. Isn't it?

BILL. What does he want to talk to you about?

SAM. Maybe you ought to ask John that.

BILL. Maybe I ought to. *(Beat.)* Does ICM know he's talking to you?

SAM. Maybe you ought to ask them.

BILL. Maybe I ought to. *(Beat.)* That's a problem of Johnny's. He's not very discreet.

SAM. What a trial that must be for you.

BILL. It's just that it's not an especially wise thing to be doing right now, talking to his old agent.

SAM. Possibly. *(Looking right at him.)* Little pitchers do have big ears.

BILL. My lips are sealed of course.

SAM. What a relief.

BILL. Is he thinking about leaving them?

SAM. Maybe he just wants to talk to a friend.

BILL. Then he can talk to me.

SAM. Maybe he wants a friend with a little more objectivity.

BILL. Objectively! For six years you were his *agent* for ~~God's~~ sake. There's precious little objectivity in ten percent.

SAM. Was is the operative word there. I *was* his agent. Now I'm just a friend. *(Beat.)*

BILL. You still over on West 57th?

SAM. Sure.

BILL. How's it going?

SAM. Fine.

BILL. Strike hurt you much?

SAM. Strike has hurt everybody.

BILL. But some people are hurting more than others. I hear.

SAM. You're really wasted in theatre, Bill. A man of your talents: the snide insinuation, gliding gracefully through innuendo, arriving finally at the smear. You belong in some branch of government where you would be truly appreciated: House Un-American Activities Committee. Something like that.

BILL. Flattery will get you nowhere.

SAM. Sure, I was sorry to see John go, but not for the loss of potential income which he represented, which admittedly was not insignificant, but because I thought he was leaving too soon for his own good. I'm a ... what you might call a mid-level agent. Always have been, always will be. That doesn't bother me, I'm good at what I do ...

BILL. *(Interrupting.)* You're the best, Sammie....

SAM. ... You're too kind ...

BILL. ... that money can buy.

SAM. *(Ignoring him.)* I have long since learned to accept the somewhat ironic fact that my best clients, those with real star potential, and those for whom, naturally, I work the hardest, will eventually leave me for the big managers or the super-power agencies. The smart ones, those with intelligence as well as talent, don't make the jump too soon and get lost over there in those big hallways. I thought John's timing was

wrong, premature, and I told him so. Maybe now, he thinks so too.

BILL. Your unselfish concern for the welfare of others is deeply moving. *(Sam shrugs.)* And so here you are, dustpan in hand, ready to pick up the pieces. Old agents never die, they just circle watchfully.

SAM. Don't include me in your genus. *(Sam walks over to the watercooler and gets another cup of water.)* You haven't asked me what I think of your show.

BILL. It's early yet. We've got another week.

SAM. It sucks.

BILL. He's young.

SAM. Precisely. So do Romeo, or Henry or even Hamlet. Not Richard.

BILL. Pachino and Moriarity did it.

SAM. And got killed.

BILL. You rolls the dice, you pays the price.

SAM. They're established. If they fail they can still walk away. John's still building.

BILL. He was brilliant last year in *Bodycount*.

SAM. The direction was brilliant. John was adequate. Beside, the part was actor proof. "Brilliant young track star busted up in Vietnam and now a hopeless paraplegic argues eloquently for the right to die with dignity?" You got a pretty face and can speak distinctly, they'll cry every night.

BILL. He wanted Richard.

SAM. You should have talked him out of it.

BILL. Talked him out of it? You don't remember Johnny very well, do you?

SAM. He's stubborn. So what? I could do it, and I was just his agent.

BILL. Well, I'm just his producer and I couldn't do it.

SAM. A little more than just his *producer*.

BILL. If you think that aspect of our relationship gives me more influence over his considerable professional ambitions you are seriously and sadly mistaken.

SAM. You should have pulled it.

BILL. He wouldn't let me.

SAM. He's bad, Bill. I don't mean mediocre, I mean *bad*. He's not there. He can't walk, he can't talk, much less emote. And don't delude yourself into thinking that the memory of *Bodycount* will assuage their wrath. Last year's discovery is always this year's target and the critics are going to eat him alive. *Alive*.

BILL. He wanted it!

SAM. That's not what I heard!

BILL. I'm not interested in what you've heard! *(The door opens and John Davis enters. He is a fair, slender man of twenty-six. At this moment he is very pale, and sweating profusely. He wears his costume of Richard III. He stares at Sam and Bill for a moment and then closes the door and leans against it.)*

JOHN. You guys wanna drop it down a couple of decibels. A little louder and they'll be able to hear you out in the lobby.

BILL. How's it going out there, Johnny?

JOHN. That's sort of what I wanted to know from you. How was the first act?

BILL. *(Together with Sam.)* Good!

SAM. *(Together with Bill.)* Fine!

JOHN. *(A beat. John looks from one to the other.)* "Good?" "Fine?" Great. *(John walks over and collapses onto the couch. He drinks the rest of Sam's water and then hands the cup to Bill.)* I'd like some more water.

SAM. You want me to clear out, John?

JOHN. No. I asked you to come. Thanks, by the way.

SAM. Hey, don't mention ...

JOHN. *(Interrupting.)* What'd you guys really think?

BILL. Well, I thought..., well, I was just listening to it tonight, back here in the dressing room, just trying to "hear" the play, and I thought it sounded, maybe, a little flat.

JOHN. Flat?

BILL. Yeah, a little.

JOHN. How?

BILL. Well, you weren't attacking the text the way ...

JOHN. *(Interrupting.)* I don't mean that, I mean how did you listen to it?

BILL. I don't follow you.

JOHN. You got bat ears or what?

BILL. What are you talking about, Johnny?

JOHN. I mean the monitor's off. IT'S OFF!! *(Beat.)* "Observation is the basis of all art." *(John laughs quietly.)* Since you missed the first act, I'll recap the highlights for you. When I started "Winter of our discontent" they laughed. I mean not ... not, out and out belly laughs. They just giggled. Giggled.

BILL. Richard is not a humorless character, John. You and Wallace have worked very hard to bring the man's sense of humor to ...

JOHN. *(Interrupting.)* Don't bull ~~me~~ me, Billy! I know the difference between getting a laugh and getting laughed at. Or if I didn't before, I do now. That part just got worse. But then I started to do this weird thing. I started to disappear. I don't mean like vanish. I mean.... First, I began to feel a little light-headed. And cold. Real cold. So that every time they laughed it was like this little trickle of ice water down my back. And then I started ... I couldn't ... I couldn't feel the ground. Couldn't feel my feet on the ground. I just sort of, drifted up into the flies. Like a balloon or something. And then I spent the rest of the act just watching my body walking around on the stage. Way down below me. Like a doll. And I talked in this little doll voice. And I said these words and I did these things but I wasn't there. I was up in the flies. *(Beat.)* You know, when it's really right? When everybody's cooking? You know that feeling when.... You guys never acted did you?

BILL. No.

SAM. A little in college.

JOHN. *(Delivers most of this to Sam.)* Well, maybe you know what I'm talking about then. There's a kind of moment when you look into your partner's eyes and you lose yourself and become part of this other thing. This tidal movement that just sweeps you up, carries you along, and it's like ... ^{fun} or something. In the Lady Anne scene I looked in her eyes and I just saw me. Saw two little "mes" reflected in her pupils. And when I danced, they danced, and when I spoke, they spoke.

They looked terrified. They looked like they wished they were up in the flies. I couldn't look at them, so I turned my eyes. And they turned their eyes. And the three of us avoided each other for the rest of the act. *(Beat.)* I know this happened because I saw it all from up in the flies. *(John starts to cry very softly.)* What am I going to do, Billy? *(Billy comes over to the couch and puts his arms around John.)* What am I going to do?

BILL. Right now, you're going to go into your dressing room and fix your makeup and then you're going to lie down for a few minutes and collect yourself, and then you're going to go out and finish the second act. Right? *(Pause.)* Right?

JOHN. Right. *(John pulls himself up and walks to the dressing room door.)* You guys don't leave me, all right?

BILL. Of course not.

JOHN. How much time have I got?

BILL. Probably another ten minutes.

JOHN. Turn the monitor on, will you? They're sloppy about the calls here.

BILL. Who is, the SM?

JOHN. Yesterday he didn't give me my five.

BILL. I'll straighten him out. Don't you worry. I'll take care of it.

JOHN. Thanks. *(John goes inside and closes the door. Bill and Sam sit silently for a minute. Neither one looks at the other one. Sam pulls a package of Wint-O-Green Lifesavers out of his pocket. Takes one out and chews on it. Pause.)*

BILL. Got an extra mint?

SAM. You gonna pull the show?

BILL. I can't.

SAM. You got no choice.

BILL. It's out of my hands. ^{God's}

SAM. You're the producer for ~~Chris~~'s sake.

BILL. Nobody closes in. Previews.

SAM. Start a new tradition.

BILL. Don't tell me how to do my job. *(Sam tosses him the pack of Lifesavers and then walks over and switches on the Monitor.)*

MONITOR VOICE. "... minutes please. Five minutes." *(There is the sound of audience members taking their seats. Bill walks over*

and knocks on the dressing room door.)

BILL. Five minutes, Johnny. *(Beat. Bill paces.)* Hard to believe they're gonna tear down this theatre. Saw my first show here in 19 ... something or other. My Aunt Terry brought me in on the train. Helen Hayes in *Sunset*. I was crazy in love with her. *(Laughs.)* Next year this will probably be the second level in some huge, glass and chrome lobby. *(Beat.)* A hotel. Jesus. *(Beat.)*

SAM. How was the tour?

BILL. *Bodycount?*

SAM. Yeah.

BILL. Fine. It was fine. We extended three and a half weeks in LA.

SAM. I hear you had some problems with the star.

BILL. Nothing major. Johnny's picky. You know that. Details. He just wants the show to be good.

SAM. You don't make the show good by coming downstage and telling the audience to "Shut up."

BILL. What do you want from him? He was nine months on the road. That wears on you.

SAM. I didn't realize the tour was that long.

BILL. Well, it was. Wasn't supposed to be, but sales were good. Almost ten months in fact.

SAM. Must have been hard on you. The two of you. *(Bill shrugs.)* All that time apart.

BILL. I got out to most of the major stops. Spent a week in Chicago.

SAM. I heard Johnny had a thing with some choline.

BILL. Nothing serious.

SAM. I heard it was serious.

BILL. You "hear" a lot, Sammie. That doesn't make it a fact.

SAM. I hear that's why you flew out to Chicago.

BILL. All right, we had some problems. Like anybody else. Especially when you're separated like that. But we talked it out and got it straight.

SAM. Is that when you had this idea?

BILL. What idea?

SAM. Is that when you suggested to him that he do Rich-

ard?

BILL. I didn't ... *(There is a quick knock on the door and then Steve sticks his head in.)*

STEVE. Sorry it took so long, Mr. Howard, but one of the Prop guys ...

BILL. *(Interrupting.)* Come back in five minutes.

STEVE. *(Seeing Sam for the first time.)* Oh, sorry. *(He closes door.)*

SAM. Pretty sharp move that. Dangle a plum classical role in front of the boy. No quid pro quo, of course. At least not overtly so. Unlike your Johnny, indiscretion is not one of your problems. Integrity, maybe. But not indiscretion.

BILL. Get out of here.

SAM. John asked me to stay. I wouldn't want to disappoint him. Did you make him think it was his idea, even? The Richard? Knowing full well that he hadn't a snowball's chance in hell of ever pulling it off. That the best he could hope for was to be quietly ignored. *(The Monitor's Voice comes in with "Places, please. Places for the top of Act II." Sam ignores it and continues.)* You weren't handing him the "role" of his lifetime — you were giving him a seppuku knife and pointing out his belly button!

BILL. Keep your voice down.

SAM. And why? Maybe because friend Johnny was beginning to overreach himself a little bit? Getting a little cocky? Believing his own PR a bit too much? Helping himself to the fruits of success somewhat piggishly? And worst of all, and most unforgivable, meeting some new people, making some new friends; maybe *making* some new people, forgetting some *old* friends!

BILL. Shut up!

SAM. Taking a NEW LOVER!

BILL. SHUT UP, ~~GO~~DAMMIT!!! *(Bill actually starts towards Sam. The dressing room door opens and John steps out. Sam and Bill stop and stare at him. John seems much more relaxed. Almost a little dazed.)*

JOHN. Can't leave you two for a minute, can I?

BILL. I'm sorry, John. We were just ... talking politics.

That's all. You know how I am about that.

JOHN. What are you, Sam, a member of the Moral Majority? That's the easiest way I know to put Billy in orbit.

SAM. Oh, I don't think we're much of a majority these days, John.

BILL. How do you feel, Johnny?

JOHN. Fine. I feel fine. I'm okay. I don't feel much like this party tonight.

BILL. I got some backers there, Johnny, people you ought to meet.

JOHN. I'm really tired tonight, Billy.

BILL. I know, Johnny, but it's important.

JOHN. Listen, I really don't think it's a good idea.

BILL. I need you there, Johnny, and you need to be there.

JOHN. Well, I ...

BILL. Look, we'll just stop by, and then go home early, okay?

JOHN. Early, huh?

BILL. Yeah, then home to bed.

JOHN. Home to bed.

BILL. I promise.

JOHN. Okay. I'd like that.

BILL. Me too. *(They kiss, very simply and without any self-consciousness about it all.)* Now, go out there and knock 'em dead.

SAM. Break a leg, Johnny.

JOHN. Right. Hey, Sam — thanks for coming by and all but, uh, today's not really a good time to talk. Maybe I can give you a call sometime next week?

SAM. Sure, anytime, John.

JOHN. Okay, I'll do that. Good to see you though.

SAM. Yeah.

BILL. Better get going, don't you think, John?

JOHN. Huh? Oh yeah. See you guys later. *(John leaves. Pause.)*

BILL. See. He's fine. He's going to be terrific.

SAM. What does he do, shoot up in there?

BILL. The drug of choice these days for the young, rich and restless is cocaine, and you don't "shoot it up." At least

not in fashionable circles.

SAM. Your opening night gift?

BILL. Hard as this may be to believe, Johnny is capable of providing some basics for himself.

SAM. You're a prince, Bill, a real prince.

BILL. He can handle it.

SAM. Sure.

BILL. I love him, Sam. Hard as that may be to believe. I love him.

SAM. Then he doesn't need enemies, does he? *(They stare at each other for a long minute.)*

BILL. You won't disappoint Johnny if you leave now. He'll call you next week. Maybe.

SAM. I'm right, aren't I? You put him up to this, knowing it would come crashing down on top of him. And when it did, he'd have nobody to come to but you.

BILL. I did it because I believe in his talent. And for your information, I'm not alone in that respect. So do a lot of other people. Cable is interested in the TV rights to his Richard. And WNET.

SAM. You never said I was wrong, Bill. Tell me I am. Tell me to my face, I'm wrong.

BILL. I love him.

SAM. I heard you the first time.

BILL. I love him.

SAM. So you say. *(Sam gets his coat and puts it on.)*

BILL. What did Johnny want to talk to you about? You know if you don't tell me, he will. Sooner or later.

SAM. I told you the first time, I don't know. Maybe he wanted an outside opinion.

BILL. On what?

SAM. On whether the screwing he's getting is worth the screwing he's getting. *(Sam exits. Bill sits on the sofa. His hands are shaking. He takes a pill out of his pocket and washes it down with a glass of water. There is a knock on the door. It opens and Steve sticks his head in.)*

STEVE. You still want that coffee, Mr. Howard? It's getting pretty cold.

BILL. Yeah, sure. Just put it on the table. *(Steve crosses to the table with a white paper bag. Puts it carefully on the table.)*

STEVE. The prune danish looked the freshest, so that's what I got. Hope that's all right?

BILL. That's fine. Prune's my favorite.

STEVE. Yeah? Me, too. You all right, Mr. Howard?

BILL. Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine.

STEVE. Can I do anything else for you?

BILL. Turn off the monitor on your way out.

STEVE. Yes, sir. *(Steve crosses over and flicks the monitor switch louder instead of off.)*

MONITOR VOICE. "... knowest thou not any whom corrupt-gold will tempt into a close exploit of death?"

"I know a ...

BILL. TURN IT OFF!! *(Steve does so.)*

STEVE. I'm sorry sir.

BILL. It's okay. It's okay. *(Pause.)* I didn't mean to yell at you like that. Just preview nerves, I guess. *(Laughs nervously.)*

STEVE. That's all right. I guess everybody'll be a little wired till opening.

BILL. Yeah. What's your name again?

STEVE. Steve. Steven Lowell.

BILL. Lowell. You an actor, Steve?

STEVE. *(Pleased.)* Yeah. *(Laughs.)* I mean, who isn't these days?

BILL. Yeah, that's true. *(Laughs.)* What's the last thing you did.

STEVE. *Marchbanks*, up at Hartford.

BILL. Good production?

STEVE. All right. Our *Candida* was a little weak.

BILL. Too bad.

STEVE. Yeah. I got back a couple of weeks ago. My buddy, Thompson, ASM? Well, he said they needed an Equity assistant, and I needed the bread so ...

BILL. I understand.

STEVE. I mean, I don't usually work backstage, you know? But ... you do what you have to do.

BILL. I understand. You have representation?

STEVE. Nah, I'm freelancing right now.

BILL. Here's my card. Give my office a call next week. Maybe I can do something for you.

STEVE. Well ... that'd be terrific. Thanks.

BILL. Don't mention it. *(He pulls a cigarette and a lighter out.)* Hit the light on the way out, would you?

STEVE. Yes, sir, Mr. Howard.

BILL. Steve? Don't call me Mr. Howard, okay? Makes me feel ancient. Just call me Bill, all right?

STEVE. Sure. Sure thing. I'll call you next week, then?

BILL. Right. *(Steve exits and turns off the light. As he does so, Bill puts the cigarette in his mouth and lights the lighter. He takes the cigarette out of his mouth. He holds the flame in front of his face for a full three beats. It is the only illumination on stage. He closes the lighter.)*

CURTAIN