

SCENE ONE.

Basil and Helen's living room.

Basil sits typing at a computer. Helen is energetically cleaning the room with a vacuum cleaner. She is moving furniture about and making a great deal of noise. As she gets closer to Basil we can see that her vacuuming is beginning to irritate him. His typing becomes ever more frenzied and inaccurate and we see his increasing frustration. She begins to vacuum around his legs. Eventually he hammers the keyboard.

BASIL: Damn and blast!

Oblivious to his outburst she continues to vacuum.

BASIL: Can't you do that some other time?

HELEN: What?

BASIL: I said do you have to do that now?

HELEN: I can't hear you, Basil.

BASIL: I said - Oh, for God's sake, Helen!

He gets up and switches the vacuum off at the plug socket.

HELEN: I haven't finished.

BASIL: Can't you do it later?

HELEN: When?

BASIL: When I'm not working.

HELEN: You're not working now. You're on holiday.

BASIL: I am working. You can see I'm working.

HELEN: Really?

BASIL: I'm writing. Or at least trying to.

HELEN: Oh, is that all you're doing? I thought it wasn't anything important.

BASIL: Nothing important?

HELEN: Well, it's hardly changed the literary landscape has it? It hasn't exactly contributed to the 'great tradition.'

BASIL: Give me time.

HELEN: Basil, you've been scribbling, or at least plonking away on that keyboard for at least nine and a half years now. And how do I know that? Because that's exactly how long we've been married. And where has it got you?

BASIL: I haven't been 'plonking away' on this keyboard for nine and a half years.

HELEN: No, before you bought the computer you had that silly little typewriter. You kept making mistakes and we had enough wasted paper to have set up a recycling centre.

BASIL: Well that doesn't happen with a word processor.

HELEN: That's as maybe. But it doesn't sound as if your typing skills have improved very much.

BASIL: Is it any wonder when I'm trying to compete against the demon vacuum queen?

HELEN: I have to keep the house clean. You wouldn't believe what lives in the average living room carpet.

BASIL: But why do you always have to do it when I'm writing?

HELEN: Because you're *always* writing. Or at least you're always plonking away on that keyboard. Why can't you be like other men, Basil? They get a computer to play shoot 'em up games or to surf the Internet for porn. But you have to be different. You have to be... 'creative.'

BASIL: If you'd take the time to read my work, Helen, maybe you'd come to appreciate it.

HELEN: I've told you. I'll read your work when you have it published or produced. When other people show appreciation. Until then you can't call yourself a writer. It's like kicking a football and claiming you're David Beckham.

BASIL: I *have* been published.

HELEN: A couple of poems and a short story. All of which you had to pay for.

BASIL: I did not.

HELEN: You had to buy the books. That's as good as paying to be published.

BASIL: It's only natural that you'd want to buy your published work.

HELEN: Basil, real writers get complimentary copies of their work. Real writers get royalties. Real writers get their work produced at the National Theatre or even by Hollywood. And if they're *really* lucky real writers get poncey TV programmes made about them late at night when no one is watching. Real writers don't have to pay Pretentious Poetry Press of Peterborough for the privilege of publication.

BASIL: You knew writing was my hobby when you married me.

HELEN: I thought by now you'd have either had some success or packed it in and bought a model railway set instead.

BASIL: All writers expect rejections. If you can't accept rejection you shouldn't write.

HELEN: Basil, why can't you accept the fact that you're a librarian? You'll always be a librarian just as I'll always be a teacher.

BASIL: Is that the extent of your ambition?

HELEN: It's my recognition of reality.

BASIL: You'll see. One day that library will be stacked with shelves of my novels and play scripts. It's all about keeping the faith, Helen.

He resumes typing again. There is the sound of the letterbox offstage.

BASIL: (*Excited.*) Ah, the post! Maybe this is it!

He goes off.

HELEN: Here we go. The usual two seconds elation until he opens it. (*Mimicking a rejection letter.*) 'Dear sir, we enjoyed reading your work, but I'm sorry to tell you that you've as much chance of becoming published as you have of finding an honest politician.'

He returns with two envelopes. Helen speaks as he opens the larger one.

HELEN: Ah the big brown epistle of rejection. Which one is this?

BASIL: My play about swinging in suburbia.

HELEN: What do they say this time? You should take up brass rubbing instead?

BASIL: (*Reading.*) 'This play is its story.'

HELEN: What's that supposed to mean?

BASIL: It means... it's obvious what it means. (*Reading.*) 'And the writer tells it well.' (*To Helen.*) See. (*Reading.*) 'The writer tackles an important theme with compassion and insight. The dialogue is effective and naturalistic, although rather expository in places. Characterisation is strong but requires further development. The piece is well structured, however somewhat lacking in dramatic tension and pace. Overall the play shows promise but suffers from a lack of confidence and needs to reveal a little more of itself.'

HELEN: What's that mean?

BASIL: I wish you'd stop asking that, Helen.

HELEN: I wish I didn't have to.

BASIL: These people know what they're talking about.

HELEN: It's a pity we don't.

BASIL: I'm getting there Helen. Each response is more positive than the last one.

HELEN: You mean each rejection is dressed up in more skilful gobbledygook than the last one.

She takes the letter from him.

BASIL: There were lots of positive comments. Compassion and insight. Effective and naturalistic.

HELEN: (*Stressing the qualifying words.*) *Although* rather expository.

BASIL: Characterisation is strong.

HELEN: *But* requires further development.

BASIL: Well structured.

HELEN: *However* somewhat lacking in dramatic tension and pace.

BASIL: The play shows promise.

HELEN: *But* suffers from a lack of confidence *and* needs to reveal a little more of itself.

Whatever that means. Maybe you should redraft it with your flies undone?

BASIL: Don't be flippant, Helen.

HELEN: Come on, Basil. Read it. Every positive comment is qualified by a negative one.

BASIL: But there *are* positive comments.

HELEN: That's because they can't very well say, 'You're crap, go and take up hang gliding instead.'

BASIL: Why not, if that's what think?

HELEN: Because they know aspiring writers are sensitive souls. And more importantly you support their workshops. You're not likely to attend a workshop if they've told you you're hopeless.

BASIL: You're so cynical, Helen.

HELEN: No matter how many positive comments you've got are you any further on than if they'd have said, 'Origami is a more creative way of wasting paper.' ? Are they going to produce it or even help you develop it? Are you any further on than you were ten years ago?

BASIL: They've given me sound advice.

HELEN: (*Looking at the letter again.*) Where? Maybe it's written in invisible ink?

BASIL: You'll never understand the creative process, Helen.

HELEN: No, and according to them, it seems neither will you.

He opens the other letter.

BASIL: Ah, *Finding a Voice!*

HELEN: What?

BASIL: *Finding a Voice.*

HELEN: I thought you'd found one.

BASIL: It's a workshop for new playwrights at the local theatre. Six pounds a session. Four pounds fifty concessions.

HELEN: Basil, you go every year.

BASIL: But this year it's led by Howard Imperial.

HELEN: Who?

BASIL: You don't mean to tell me you've never heard of Howard Imperial?

HELEN: Is that like admitting to wanting to kick a koala bear?

BASIL: Helen, you don't?

HELEN: No, I don't. But nor do I know Howard Imperial.

BASIL: And you're a teacher too.

HELEN: Yes, and I don't know next weekend's winning lottery numbers either. Isn't that shameful?

BASIL: Good grief, Helen! Howard Imperial is one of the country's greatest living theatre practitioners. Writer, actor, director. He's rumoured to be on next year's honours list.

HELEN: So was the guy who led last year's session. What was that one called?

BASIL: *Character and Context*.

HELEN: I mean the genius who sold you the benefit of his wisdom?

BASIL: Robin Middlemas.

HELEN: Robbing's about right. It didn't help you to get anything produced, did it?

BASIL: But Howard Imperial's more famous than Robin Middlemas.

HELEN: Is he?

BASIL: Yes, he wrote *Daughters Of Transience*. You remember that play we went to see at the National.

HELEN: Basil, it's ingrained upon my memory.

BASIL: It was heightened realism.

HELEN: So that was why I couldn't make head nor tail of it.

BASIL: Apparently that's Howard Imperial's style.

HELEN: Nor could you. You started applauding at one point because you thought it had finished when, as we later found out to our eternal joy, there were another ninety minutes to go. It was most embarrassing. Especially when everyone else was asleep.

BASIL: It was the kind of piece you need to see more than once to fully appreciate it.

Apparently there were lots of people who kept returning. Why do you think its run had to be extended?

HELEN: I thought it was because they found it the best cure for insomnia?

BASIL: I don't care what you say. I've a great deal of admiration for Howard Imperial and I want to hear what he has to say. Maybe I'll take some of my work along for him to look at? You never know, he might just be my foot in the door.

HELEN: Like Robin Middlemas was?

BASIL: Why don't you come with me this year, Helen? Go into it with an open mind and you might actually get something out of it.

Pause as she considers.

HELEN: You expect me to say, 'you must be joking' or give you some sarcastic riposte, don't you? But you know, Basil, for once I'm going to shock you. Because I actually think I will. For once I'd like to see a great artist at work. After all, don't they say you have to learn from the best?

BASIL: (*Pleased.*) That's right, Helen.

HELEN: Especially if you want to be a successful *con* artist.

He looks at her in surprise.

Lights down.

SCENE TWO.

A workshop room in a theatre. A couple of tables and several chairs.

Helen sits as Basil paces about anxiously. It is evident they have been waiting for some time.

Eventually he speaks.

BASIL: I wonder what he'll think of my stuff?

HELEN: Who?

BASIL: Who? Who do you think?

HELEN: Oh, you mean the invisible man?

BASIL: He's probably travelling from London. You know what the transport's like.

HELEN: Are you sure we've got the right time and place, Basil?

BASIL: Of course we have... Do you think he'll like it?

HELEN: Where's everyone else then?

BASIL: They'll be here... I just brought a couple of pieces. Don't want to overwhelm him.

HELEN: Are you sure anyone's coming? Maybe it's been cancelled owing to a sudden outbreak of apathy?

BASIL: Don't be ridiculous, Helen. Who's going to turndown the chance of meeting Howard Imperial?

HELEN: Apparently everyone in town apart from us.

BASIL: Nonsense. Look here's Mrs Selly now.

HELEN: You know her?

Mrs Selly enters. She is an old lady, well spoken, but eccentrically dressed - blue coat, pink hat, Wellington boots, national health spectacles with a sticking plaster half covering one of the lenses. She carries a shopping bag containing nothing but tins of cat food. While Basil is speaking the following she goes to a table and starts rooting around in her shopping bag,

taking out tins of cat food and stacking them on the table. She appears oblivious of Basil and Helen as she continues stacking the tins until there are about a dozen.

BASIL: She comes every year. She's also our best customer in the library. Borrows dozens of books and always forgets to return them. She must have more in her flat than we have in the county. *(To Mrs Selly, loudly.)* Good afternoon, Mrs Selly.

MRS SELLY: Good afternoon, young man. Isn't it a lovely day?... Now, I know I've got them here somewhere.

She continues to root around in her bag.

BASIL: What might that be, Mrs Selly?

She continues taking out tins of cat food as she talks.

MRS SELLY: I could have sworn I put them in my shopping basket... There was an Agatha Christie, a Catherine Cookson, two Jilly Coopers and the *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. Can't remember who wrote that one, but it was the best.

BASIL: Hubert Selby.

MRS SELLY: *(Continuing to root around in her bag.)* No, it's Selly. Mrs Geraldine, Anastasia Selly. *(She stops rooting and spells it out to him.)* G. A. S.

BASIL: Gas?

MRS SELLY: Is there really? How extraordinary I can't detect it and I normally have such a developed sense of smell. It comes from my experience in the perfume trade, you know.

BASIL: No, Mrs Selly. Your initials.

MRS SELLY: What about them?

BASIL: Never mind. Anyway Hubert Selby wrote *Last Exit to Brooklyn*.

MRS SELLY: Did he really? The dirty devil!

BASIL: I thought you said you liked it?

MRS SELLY: And what might that be, young man?

BASIL: *Last Exit to Brooklyn?*

Mrs Selly appears nonplussed. There are now about two dozen tins of cat food on the counter.

BASIL: The book, Mrs Selly. An Agatha Christie, a Catherine Cookson, two Jilly Coopers and the *Last Exit to Brooklyn* by Hubert Selby.

MRS SELLY: *(Giving a girlish giggle.)* Oh, silly me! I'm afraid I seem to have forgotten them.

She begins putting the tins of cat food back in her bag. Basil helps her.

BASIL: You're not in the library now anyway, Mrs Selly. But you really must try to remember the books the next time you visit. If you weren't a senior citizen you'd owe fifty four pounds thirty nine pence in fines.

MRS SELLY: Would I really?

She gives another girlish giggle. When the tins of cat food have been put back in her shopping bag she hesitates as though trying to remember something.

MRS SELLY: So is this the correct venue for the exhibition?

BASIL: Exhibition?

MRS SELLY: The exhibition of erotica. I believe it's touring the provinces this year.

BASIL: No, this is *Finding a Voice* - a workshop for new playwrights.

MRS SELLY: (*Confused.*) Is it really?

BASIL: Yes. It's led by Howard Imperial. Have you read any of his work?

MRS SELLY: Whose?

BASIL: Howard Imperial's. I thought with you being such a voracious reader you might well be acquainted with him?

MRS SELLY: I have had many acquaintances over the years in most of the great imperial capitals of continental Europe. But I'm sorry to say it isn't the same since the proletariat were liberated.

BASIL: I'm sure it isn't, Mrs Selly.

MRS SELLY: Of course I have fond recollections of my time as a ballerina. Did I ever tell you about those days?

BASIL: (*Indulgently.*) Frequently.

MRS SELLY: Naturally I once auditioned for the Bolshoi. The Princess Odette in *Swan Lake*.

BASIL: I'm sure Tchaikovsky himself would have been proud of you.

MRS SELLY: If he was he didn't show it.

BASIL: I expect he wouldn't.

MRS SELLY: The Slavics always were somewhat inscrutable. As a rule I preferred the Latins. As Mama used to say they know how to wear their hearts on their sleeves.

BASIL: Where else?

Mrs Selly appears to be trying to recall something else.

BASIL: Is there something else, Mrs Selly?

MRS SELLY: My son's coming home today, you know.

BASIL: Is he really?

MRS SELLY: Yes indeed. It was terrible the way they tortured him, but he still wouldn't talk.

BASIL: Really?

MRS SELLY: Yes, indeed. Unspeakable some of the things they did to him.

BASIL: Were they?

MRS SELLY: Indeed they were. Lighted matchsticks doesn't come into it. I told him to keep away from those girls. I expect your mother tells you the same?

BASIL: No, but my wife does. You haven't met my wife Helen have you, Mrs Selly?

He introduces them.

BASIL: Mrs Selly, my wife Helen. Helen, Mrs Selly.

MRS SELLY: *(To Helen.)* I think it's such a shame, my dear.

HELEN: What's that?

MRS SELLY: I'm extremely broadminded and some of my dearest friends are of the other persuasion, but a fine young man like this really ought to have a girlfriend.

BASIL: This is my wife, Mrs Selly.

MRS SELLY: I always believe in live and let live, but it seems such a waste.

BASIL: Mrs Selly, do you think I'm gay?

MRS SELLY: Antonio Baresi. He was such a delightful young man. The hips of a dancer and the profile of a matinee idol. One of the few Italians Papa actually approved of, even though he spoke very little English. I think it was because Papa thought my honour was safe with him. Little did he know that Antonio was receptive to new experiences.

BASIL: I've just introduced you to my wife, Mrs Selly. I'm not gay

MRS SELLY: Why, what is bothering you?

BASIL: Homosexual. I'm not homosexual.

MRS SELLY: I really haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about. But I shall be moving to Brighton soon anyway. I've obtained a position at the Grand Hotel. BASIL: Really? What position's that then?

MRS SELLY: I'm not at liberty to divulge as yet, but you can rest assured it won't have anything to do with the cats.

She taps her nose conspiratorially and shuffles off. Basil smiles.

BASIL: Bye, Mrs Selly.

HELEN: What cats?

Basil notices a tin of cat food she has left behind. He picks it up.

BASIL: The ones she buys all this food for.

HELEN: Is she really moving to Brighton?

BASIL: She was going to be a missionary in the Congo last week.

HELEN: And the Bolshoi?

BASIL: Somehow don't you just wish it were true?

HELEN: She certainly doesn't need to stay here to gain inspiration.

Basil starts pacing about again.

BASIL: Maybe I should have brought my play about corruption in high places? Only perhaps he'd think it wasn't dramatic enough?

HELEN: Have you bought the one about suburban swinging? I'm sure he'll think that's dramatic.

BASIL: (*Anxiously.*) Damn, I forgot to bring that one! Do you think I've time to go home and get it?

HELEN: Basil, calm down. I'm joking. He probably won't look at any of your work.

BASIL: Of course he will.

HELEN: If he ever turns up.

BASIL: He'll be along soon.

HELEN: Wasn't that what they said about Godot?

Suddenly an elderly but high spirited and loquacious Irishman enters.

CON: (*Southern Irish accent.*) Basil, me ole mate! Thought I'd find you here, you ole rascal.

BASIL: Con Fitzgerald. Thought you'd left town?

CON: Ah, just because I'm banned from the library doesn't mean to say I've left town. An' I know it wasn't really you who banned me, Basil.

BASIL: Well, actually it was.

CON: Ah, but you were only doin' your duty, so you were. I know if it'd hada been up to you I'd still have the run o' the place today, so I would. You bein' a liberal, easy goin' young fellow an' all that.

HELEN: (*To Basil.*) Why was he banned from the library?

BASIL: You don't want to know.

HELEN: God, it's like a library users reunion here!

BASIL: So you've come to have another go at penning your masterpiece have you, Con?

CON: Well, as you know I've a monstrous fund o' stories in here (*pointing to his head*) so I have. But I need a little help gettin' 'em down on the paper. An' I thought yer man this year might be the fellow to help me do that. That one last year was a right waste o' time, so he was. Do yous know I even asked for me three pounds fifty back.

BASIL: Did you get it?

CON: Did I hell!... (*Crossing himself.*) Lord forgive me.

BASIL: It's gone up to four fifty this year anyway.

CON: Then this fellow should be better, so he should.

BASIL: One would hope so.

He introduces Helen.

BASIL: This is my wife Helen. Helen, Con Fitzgerald.

CON: Pleased to meet you, darlin'... (*He looks at her.*) Ah, I had a sweetheart once, so I did.

Back in County Kildare. Bridgett O Sullivan. Ah, she was the loveliest creature that ever graced God's earth, so she was. Long dark hair, the most exquisitely pretty face, skin like alabaster an' the personality of an angel. Ah, every time she smiled you'da thought the sun was shinin' even in the middle o' darkest winter, so you would.

HELEN: What happened?

Con appears embarrassed.

CON: Ah, sure enough, I don't like to say.

BASIL: Con?.. You can tell us.

CON: I came back from across the water one day. Plenty o' cash in me pocket an' me heart fit to burstin' with love, an' I only found that she'd run off with the local priest.

They appear sympathetic.

HELEN: Oh, how awful!

CON: (*Sincerely.*) Ah, me ma said I was well shot o' her, so she did. After all, I'd wasted *two* whole weeks an' nearly *fifteen* pounds courtin' her.

Helen looks at Basil in surprise.

CON: I hope yous don't mind if I have a smoke.

BASIL: No, go right ahead, Con.

He begins rolling a cigarette.

CON: Only when I started to light up in the library one time they looked at me as if I'd just farted in their faces, so they did.

BASIL: It is designated no smoking, Con.

CON: Sure, I expect it's designated no fartin' an' all. But old mother Selly let one out once that was enough to stun a buffalo at thirty paces, so it was.

HELEN: Well, isn't that delightful to know?

CON: Ah, the library's a wonderful place for learning all kinds of things, so it is.

Helen is amazed. There is silence for a time as Con smokes and Basil starts to pace about again.

BASIL: I've brought my script about conscientious objectors. But what if he thinks it isn't contemporary enough?

HELEN: Basil, the most up to the minute, in tune, zeitgeist minded opus imaginable would have become outdated by the time he arrives.

BASIL: He'll be here.

HELEN: If you'd have completed it tomorrow it'd still be past its sell by date.

BASIL: They'd have let us know by now if he wasn't coming.

HELEN: Who would? There's no one else here.

BASIL: Give them time. You saw how busy the traffic was.

HELEN: Basil, we're already twenty five minutes behind the scheduled starting time and there are three of us here. I could have stayed home and made a start on that pile of marking I've got.

CON: Are yous a schoolteacher then?

HELEN: I'm also married to Basil for my sins.