



Comedy Plays

"It's a funny business"



Better Never Than Late

by

Arthur Kaufman

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This is a one act play, on 11 pages. Depending on how it was staged, I think it would run to around 20 minutes, or perhaps slightly more, based on what I have heard from just a script reading.

There are two characters, one a Boy, aged 14 and a Shrink (psychiatrist) in an initial therapy session, with the Boy having been referred for treatment because of problems at school.

The Boy doesn't think there is really anything wrong with him, mentally, while the Shrink keeps probing while trying to interpret what the Boy says in therapeutic or psychodynamic terms, as though he had underlying psychological problems.

As the play progresses, the Shrink's interpretations (? sometimes grasping at straws), are persistently 'shot down' by the Boy, who responds with what seems a realistic if not a 'real life' account of how he views his world and those around him.

This causes the Shrink some annoyance, as he thinks the Boy is evading his questions.

Eventually, the Boy begins to do a little 'probing' of the Shrink, who opens up relevant details about his own past, including some personal details about his childhood.

The session reaches the stage where the Boy begins to talk about his mother and his father (who is not his biological father), followed by an easing of the exchanges between himself and the Shrink, along with a gradual warming of their relationship which increases towards the end of the play.

The play ends with the Shrink telling the boy that sometimes it's better if people sort out problems on their own, so he doesn't have to come again for more sessions. But, just after the boy leaves, the Shrink is shown to be in an emotionally distressed state (I've deliberately not given further details here, which I hope the reader – and the audience – will appreciate why).

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- SHRINK : Come in and sit down – uh – it's Andrew I believe ?
- BOY : Andy.
- SHRINK : You prefer Andy to Andrew ?
- BOY : Yeah.
- SHRINK : Would it bother you if I called you Andrew ?
- BOY : Suit yourself. What are you called?
- SHRINK : Dr Colder, but you can call me Frank if you want.
- BOY : 'Colder' is a funny name
- SHRINK : Why do you say that ?
- BOY : I don't know, it just sounds funny to me.
- SHRINK : Do you know why I've been asked to see you ?
- BOY : Suppose you tell me; you must know cause I was sent here.
- SHRINK : I'd rather you'd try and tell me yourself. It's you who's got to do most of the talking during our sessions together.
- BOY : What about ?
- SHRINK : The things that bother you.
- BOY : What things ?
- SHRINK : Well you must be worried about something ... uh... such as, any difficulties at school? Your teachers say you've been skipping classes even though they think you're very bright and could go far if you attended as you should.
- BOY : Come off it ! They bore me. They keep going over the same stuff again and again like the whole class was thick. They don't teach interesting stuff, like about space travel.
- SHRINK : Well, we could start by talking about that. I see that you were born in 1969 when Man first landed on the moon. That makes you 14, and your schooling is very important from now on, don't you agree?
- BOY : Suppose so, can I ask you something? Are you really a doctor ? You sure don't look like one. You don't even have one of those stetho things around your neck.
- SHRINK : Yes, I'm a doctor but probably not the sort you've come across before. I try and help people with their problems.
- BOY : What problems ?
- SHRINK : Well, you might say problems in living.
- BOY : You mean nutter cases like Mr Thompson next door to me, who keeps talking to God.

SHRINK : (LAUGHS) Not exactly, but it wouldn't be proper for me to discuss another doctor's case with you.

BOY : I spoke to God once.

SHRINK : Really ?

BOY : Yeah, I once asked him to send me a bike with gears for my birthday, but didn't get one, so I gave him up as a bad job.

SHRINK : Wasn't that a bit hard on poor old God ?

BOY : All my mates got bikes with gears, with back and front lights. I had to wait until last year before my Nan bought me one when she really couldn't afford to.

SHRINK : Do you think that it's right to judge God or anyone else for that matter by what they give or don't give us ?

BOY : How should I know ? I'm off that religion stuff anyway. Maybe that's why they sent me to see you.

SHRINK : Surely you don't think that's the real reason, do you really ?

BOY : I thought doctors were supposed to tell you what was wrong with you and then make you better if they could.

SHRINK : (A BIT ANNOYED) Now going round in circles like that isn't going to get us anywhere. Besides, doctors can only help people who want to help themselves. We're not God you know.

BOY : You can say that again. I already told you that he wouldn't even bring me a bloody bike when I was younger and me being the only one on the road without one.

SHRINK : Did you ever tell anyone how you felt about this. Seems you still feel bad about it. You've not been to see anyone like me or another doctor before for help, have you ?

BOY : I only know one other doctor, my GP, Dr Gifford, but my mum won't take me to see him ever since . . .

SHRINK : Yes . . . ?

BOY : Since I almost died from my appendix after he said I was trying it on when I said it hurt bad, but he wouldn't do anything about it.

SHRINK : We all make mistakes, even doctors.

BOY : He wouldn't even come to see me at the house and they had to rush me to hospital in a taxi.

SHRINK : You mentioned your mother. How do you feel about her ?

BOY : The doctor at the hospital said if I'd a been an hour later I would of died . He was hopping mad at Dr Gifford.

SHRINK : You don't seem to want to talk about your mother. I wonder why not ?

BOY : Maybe it's cause I'd like a new one.

SHRINK : (COUGHS) Uh, I'm not quite sure what you mean.

BOY : (A BIT LOUDER) I said I'd like a new Mum.

SHRINK : Perhaps we'd better talk a little more about that ?

BOY : I'd like a new Dad too. Maybe one who's not on the dole.

SHRINK ; That's easier said than done. You can't choose new parents like you choose new shoes.

BOY : Who said anything about shoes ?

SHRINK : You can't even pick your parents first time round. Besides, who would have kept an eye on you when you were too small to look after yourself ?

BOY : My Nan would. She's always looked after me anyway.

SHRINK : I don't think you want to discuss your mother, or your father for that matter, but that's alright, we can move on to something else.

BOY : They're always fighting and want to get divorced and they've both got a bit on the side.

SHRINK : Perhaps we're beginning to get somewhere now ?

BOY : So why can't I have my 'bit' and get some new parents then ?

SHRINK : We're not back to that again, are we ?

BOY : But what about all this stuff about kid's rights ? You can vote now when you're only 18.

SHRINK : I'm afraid that the law doesn't allow children to pick new parents, like mums and dads do in picking new husbands and wives. Even grown-ups don't have much say on what kind of kids they have, do they ?

BOY : What if they go and adopt some ?

SHRINK : That's not the same thing. It's a bit more complicated than you think.

BOY : Look, if my mum and dad decide they want to pair up with someone else's dad and mum, there's nothing to stop them doing it, right ?

SHRINK : Uh . . . technically speaking, I suppose not.

BOY : What do you mean, "technically" ?

SHRINK : Well it sort of means that they're legally entitled to do so, but that doesn't make it right, even though it's not actually against the Law.

BOY : So they can go off and get new husbands and new wives and even new kids, and I can't even get one lousy new parent because the Law says I can't.

SHRINK : I'm afraid that'd be the way things are. I don't make the rules you know and I have to live in the same world that you do. As a bright lad you'll realise this as you grow older.

BOY : I wouldn't mind a new brother too. Mine always knocks me about just cause he's bigger than me.

SHRINK : You seem to have problems in getting along with lots of people and not just your parents.

BOY : All my mates hate their brothers, even their little ones but they don't go knocking them about.

SHRINK : What about their sisters ? Do they feel any different towards them ?

BOY : Yeah, but me and my mates don't like to be with girls, even at birthday parties.

SHRINK : That sounds a little odd to me. You must really dislike members of the opposite sex and I wonder if that's the reason why you don't want to talk about your mother. Now how does that strike you ?

BOY : You trying to make out I'm a puff or something ?

SHRINK : (A LITTLE TAKEN ABACK) Uh – no, I simply wonder why you seem to dislike females so much since your mother, who after all, is a female; otherwise she wouldn't be your mother, or anyone else's for that matter.

BOY : Hey, if I hated women like you're trying to make out, then why would I keep asking for a new mum ? I suppose if I kept asking for a new father, you'd still be calling me a puff.

SHRINK : Uh – I must admit, you seem to have a point there, but getting back to your mother again, it's sometimes the case that boys – or even some men – are too attached to their mothers and this prevents them from forming normal, healthy relationships with other women.

BOY : You mean like wanting to get them into bed ? That's what kids I know talk about when we see what lots of parents get up to.

SHRINK ; Well, at least you appear to be normal in one respect – perhaps a little too normal for your age but I won't quibble about that.

BOY : So ... what if I met a nice lady who wanted to look after me and I thought she'd make a great mum when my own mum didn't want me around anyway ? And, I wouldn't be bothered about not having a new Dad. I wouldn't care if my new Mum was a *bit queer* as long as she treated me alright.

SHRINK : You seem to be more concerned over having a nice mother than a father. I wonder why ?

BOY : Did you have a mum and dad around when you were my age ?

SHRINK : Aren't you avoiding my question ?

BOY : What question ?

SHRINK : The one about your mother and father.

BOY : I'm not bothered much about them; I'd just like a change from the ones I'm got. Anyway, what's wrong with being adopted? Didn't you ever think about being adopted when you were a kid?

SHRINK : As a matter of fact I had a very happy childhood but I hope you'll accept that we're not here to discuss my problems.

BOY : If you had such a good time when you were a kid, how come you got problems now ?

SHRINK : (SLIGHTLY STERN) Everyone has problems. The important thing is to try and solve them. That's why you're here today.

BOY : Then why can't you do what I want? All I'm asking for is a new mum and you say there's no way I can get one. Sounds pretty stupid to me.

SHRINK : Sometimes it's better to try and cope with a situation than take the easy way out and try and run away from it. Besides, if you could have a different mother or father, do you think that would be fair to their children if they had any before they had you?

BOY : One of my friend's mother ran off with her boss and nobody asked him or his sister if they thought it was fair. They were then fobbed off on relatives they hated. It was bloody awful and my friend kept running away.

SHRINK : Do you think it would really help your friend if he had a new mother ?

BOY : Sure, that's just what happened cause last month he got this new Step-mum who he thinks is great. His real mother never visits him and he never even misses her.

SHRINK : A month is not a very long time to see if things will work out or not. It takes a long time before you get to know someone, deep down I mean.

BOY : Well I've had my own Mum and Dad for ages. That's long enough to see if you like someone or if they like you. If I had kids of my own I wouldn't make them stay with me if they didn't want to. It wouldn't be bloody fair, would it?

SHRINK : I think you might feel much better about your mother and even your father than you're ready to admit, either to me or to yourself.

BOY : Then why do I keep asking if I could have new parents ?

SHRINK : Suppose you answer that one yourself !

BOY : Look, if I knew a boy my age who didn't like his old man, but I thought his old man was OK and this kid liked my Dad better than I did, why couldn't we just do a swap like grown-ups do with when they go to parties? You should see what happens at our house on Friday nights after the pubs close !

SHRINK : Uh . . . (SLIGHTLY TAKEN ABACK) you mean like , uh wife swapping as some people prefer to call it ?

BOY : Yeah.

SHRINK : Sometimes adults don't behave in sensible ways either.

BOY : Does that mean they've got to come and see a doctor like you?

SHRINK : Not necessarily.

BOY : Why not ?

SHRINK : Well, it doesn't follow that you're . . . uh . . . mentally unstable if you're not faithful to your husband or your wife.

BOY : You mean like having a bit on the side when you should be having it off with your old woman instead ?

SHRINK : (A BIT AWKWARD) I wouldn't put it exactly like that but you're more or less on the right track.

BOY : So grown-ups can go off and leave their kids when they feel like it, but if kids think their parents are rubbish and want new ones, everyone then thinks they're crackers like me.

SHRINK : You're pretty good at working out the logic but life isn't as straightforward as you make it out to be. What you're suggesting sounds a little far fetched . Don't you agree ?

BOY : You must think I'm crackers ? The social worker they sent round said I was.

SHRINK : We prefer not to use words like that in my job. You're certainly not 'crackers' as you put it. I've very sure of that.

BOY : Well she did and I told her to push off. That's probably why I'm here. But if I'm not crackers like you say I'm not, what am I then ?

SHRINK : Someone who doesn't want to discuss his feelings towards his mother.

BOY : Jeez, I've already told you what's bugging me, but you keep telling me that's the way the cookie crumbles and there's nothing you can do about it. Some doctor you are. I'd be better off with old Dr Gifford.

SHRINK : If it helps you to get angry with me, that's alright, as long as you realise why you're feeling that way.

BOY : Who said anything about getting angry ?

SHRINK : There's nothing wrong with ventilating your feelings. Most people are afraid to let themselves go.

BOY : Are you ?

SHRINK : Am I what ?

BOY : Afraid to tell anyone just where to shove it when you feel like saying it.

SHRINK : There's a time and a place for everything.

BOY : Then it's about time they changed the bloody Law so I can have some new parents. That's what I said to that social worker when she called me "crackers". She got really mad when I asked her if she was wearing a bra. My Nan told me she was one of those women libbers who don't want to be mothers anyway.

SHRINK : Well even if the Law was changed and you could choose a new mother as you like to call it, don't you think you're too young to be able to handle something as big as that ?

BOY : Don't see why not? Didn't you say my teachers thought I was pretty clever?

SHRINK : That's true, but I still don't know how you feel about your own mother.

BOY : Did you like your mother ?

SHRINK : It won't help solve your problems by avoiding them or by keep changing the subject.

BOY : But I thought you were here to cure me of whatever's supposed to be wrong with me like a real doctor would?

SHRINK : (ANNOYED) I can't do that if you won't tell me what's bothering you, now can I?

BOY : I've told you what's bothering me and you've said you can't do much about it. It's

alright for you, cause you probably had a nice mum and dad when you were my age. I bet you had a good bike too !

SHRINK : (DEFENSIVE) Actually, I had a happy childhood but I never said anything about my mother or my father. As a matter of fact I never even knew my father and my mother had to raise me on her own. And, the bike I had didn't even have gears !

BOY : My Mum once told me that my Dad wasn't my real Dad, which is why he didn't have much to do with me, so I guess I never knew my real Dad either. That makes us the same, doesn't it?

SHRINK : I think you may be starting to open up now. That's very good. Go on please.

BOY : But if my 'Dad' isn't my real Dad, then no one would mind if I looked for another one, and then that'd be OK, wouldn't it ?

SHRINK : Look, you're trying to avoid talking about your problems again, which I'm afraid won't get us any further. Just because your words seem to make sense to you doesn't necessarily mean you've chosen the wisest course of action.

BOY I don't see why you're so fussed about my dad if he isn't my real dad anyway. You're really lucky, you didn't have any father to worry about, but I bet your mother went out with men you never met. So why I should worry about my Dad if he isn't my real Dad anyway.

SHRINK : Look, lots of boys wish they had a father about even if not their real one. It's who brings you up that counts and not who uh ... made their mother pregnant.

BOY : Don't you wish you had a father, I mean who you knew and was really yours , even though he messed around with other women?

SHRINK : (SLIGHTLY EXASPERATED) I'd like to get back to talking about you if you don't mind. Discussing any problems I might have had when I was your age isn't going to get us any further. Besides, it was a very long time ago – I've almost forgotten how long.

BOY : You don't look that old. How old are you anyway ?

SHRINK : I'm not as young as you think; in fact I'm probably old enough to be your father.

BOY : It would be funny if you really were, since my Mum says another man she once knew is my real Dad. You never went out with my Mum did you ? She was very pretty when she was younger. And last year in the attic I found nude pictures my dad took of her before they got married. You sure you never met my Mum ?

SHRINK : Uh – I don't believe so. What makes you say that anyway ?

BOY : Well, before I was born, she had a job tidying up the doctors' rooms at that big hospital in town, and once I heard her telling the lady next door what randy buggers the young ones were, but knowing my Mum, she didn't tell them to get lost. You never worked at that hospital before you came here, did you ?

SHRINK : (SOUNDING DISTINCTLY WORRIED) Uh, pardon ?

BOY : (LOUDER) I said did you work there before you started doctoring here ?

SHRINK : (UNCOMFORTABLY) I think I did spend about three months there, filling in for another doctor who was off sick, but it was only part-time and the occasional week-end.

BOY : That's when my Mum worked there, on week-ends I mean. When I come next time I'll bring a picture of her when she was younger, a nice one with her clothes on. She's still not bad looking. You'd probably recognise her, even though she keeps changing her hair colour.

SHRINK : (A BIT STERNLY) I don't think it's necessary to bring any photos of your mother. She probably wouldn't appreciate it.

BOY : Maybe you'd like to see a picture of my old man too, although he's gone all bald now. I hope I don't go bald like him, but maybe I won't if my real Dad had lots of hair like yours.

SHRINK : I think we should get back to talking about you again. Otherwise we'll be wasting our time.

BOY : I thought that's what we've been doing today. You keep asking about my parents and when I try and tell you about them you blame me for not saying the right things. Can't you make up your mind ?

SHRINK : (DEFINITELY ANNOYED) I don't think I'd put it quite like that. What I'm trying to do is find out what's bothering you and then give you the opportunity to let me know how you feel about it. Now that's not so hard to understand, is it? I get the feeling that for an intelligent boy you're being deliberately difficult.

BOY : That's just what my Mum says before she belts me.

SHRINK : What did you say ? That could be serious !

BOY : You're not going to belt me, are you ?

SHRINK : (VERY THERAPEUTIC TONE) Is that what you expect from adults ? Not every grown up is as hostile as that,

BOY : You sure look mad enough to belt me.

SHRINK : I'm not angry or 'mad' as you put it, but you may be reacting to me like you react to other grown-ups close to you. Did you ever think of it that way ?

BOY : I still think you'd like to belt me. I bet you don't like me.

SHRINK : (SUPPRESSING ANGER) Perhaps we could agree that I don't like what you're doing – that is trying to make me angry with you. But not liking what you're doing isn't the same as not liking you as a person. Can you appreciate the difference ?

BOY : You mean you go round liking people when you feel like belting them one. I thought I'm the one who's supposed to be "crackers".

SHRINK : (RESIGNED) As time is running short, perhaps we could move onto something else ?

BOY : I don't mind, but when I tell you what I'm thinking about, you make me talk about something else, and when I don't say what you want me to say, you tell me I'm talking a load of rubbish. I don't know what to do now.

SHRINK : How about telling me about the first thought that comes into your head ?

BOY : Are you going to show me any of those pictures with those funny inkblots and make me say what they remind me of ? I once heard there was a video, where a doctor like you showed these pictures to a bloke that raped his best friend's wife.

SHRINK : Uh . . . I'm afraid we don't use those sort of techniques here. Perhaps you could tell me something else that's in your mind this minute?

BOY : Could I ask another question instead?

SHRINK : If you must.

BOY : Do you have any kids ?

SHRINK : Asking me personal questions like that isn't going to get us anywhere either, but if you must know I have three by my, uh ... first marriage, two boys and a girl.

BOY : You must be joking ?

SHRINK : (SLIGHTLY COCKY) So I probably know more about children than you think I do.

BOY : But, do you like your kids or wish they were never born?

SHRINK : Nobody likes their children all of the time but that doesn't mean they're unloved. You might think of that when you're talking of having a new mother or father. Perhaps yours are not able to show how much they really care for you ?

BOY : I wish my old man was a doctor. Then I could go to a posh school and have a new bike and maybe be a doctor too.

SHRINK : It doesn't follow that just because someone has a doctor for a father, or even a teacher or a policeman for that matter, that it automatically makes him a good parent to his children.

BOY : I bet you'd make a great father ! At least you sit down and talk to kids and listen to what they say, even though you keep telling them to say something else.

SHRINK : But, that's what I've been trained to do. It takes a long time and you've got to do a lot of studying. You've even got to go to University as well. But having a university degree is no guarantee of being a good parent. Many people who've been to University turn out to be rotten parents. I know, because we see lots of their kids here, but we won't go into that now. For someone so young, you're very, very clever at talking about only what you want to talk about.

BOY : Do you think I could go to University and do a job like yours ?

SHRINK : Uh, I don't see why not, provided you try hard, although I see from your school report (LOOKS DOWN AT PAPERS) that you're also a bit of a trouble maker and don't hand in your work on time. You'll never get into University that way.

BOY : My Mum used to work in a University, cleaning. She says the professors there were as randy as the doctors at the hospital you worked at, but she must have liked it there cause she stayed for three years before our Sarah came along.

SHRINK : (SLIGHTLY EXASPERATED) I think we've spent enough time talking about your mother's job or, should I say you continuing to avoid what's really upsetting you.

BOY : You wouldn't like to be my Dad, would you, even if you weren't my real one ?

SHRINK : Eh ?? (SOUNDING TAKEN ABACK)

BOY : Or, if you couldn't be my dad, maybe you know some other doctors who don't have any kids but would like one, just like me.

SHRINK : You can't be serious ? Besides, that certainly wouldn't solve any of your problems which you don't seem willing to talk about anyway.

BOY : Maybe, next time, I could ask my Mum to come along and she could tell you all you'd like to know about me, even when I was a baby cause I can't remember much before I was six or seven. My Nan says I even forget what I've been up to the day before, like when I've been really bad.

SHRINK : (SOUNDS AND LOOKS DISTINCTLY UNCOMFORTABLE) Uh – I've had a thought. As we don't appear to be getting very far, perhaps we should give it a rest for a while and I'll send for you if I feel there's anything further that I can do. Some times , in fact quite often, it appears that people sort themselves out better when left to their own devices than when they come along for long chats with someone like myself. Now how does that sound to you ?

BOY : Fine by me, but I wanted you to meet my Mum. You'd probably like her. Most people do.

SHRINK : Never mind, I might one day. It's a small world you know and its often funny how things turn out. Very funny indeed.

BOY : Anyway, look after yourself . . . Frank – you said I could call you Frank.

SHRINK : That's right Andy, take care now and you'll do alright. Don't forget to do your best at school. If you try hard, no reason you shouldn't go to university. And maybe even be an astronaut going to the moon if that's what you really want.

BOY : I'll try Frank, but by the way . . .

SHRINK : What now Andy, I've got other patients waiting and I'm running very late.

BOY : I'm glad they call you Frank.

SHRINK : Why's that ?

BOY : My old man at home's called Frank and I'll think of you whenever I talk to him even though we don't talk much anymore.

SHRINK : (WITH SUPPRESSED EMOTION IN HIS VOICE) Thanks Andy, so long for now. I'll certainly think of you too each time one of those space rockets blasts off and all those aboard are back safely on Earth again.

BOY : Yeah, that's great Frank. Maybe some day I'll be going on one . If I do, I'll look you up and tell you all about it, and you could tell me how you're getting on, cause we'd have a lot to talk about by then, wouldn't we? I might even have kids of my own, who you could meet if that's alright?

SHRINK : (STILL DISTRESSED BUT IN BETTER CONTROL) What a nice thought, or such a nice one to end on - but who knows where we'll both be when you're a grown man with tons of responsibilities, and with me being long retired even if I'm still alive. And, if I am, I'll never forget what you've just said. But, you must be on your way now, as I'm sure that each of us has lots to do and much to think about. If you try your best, especially at school, you'll do very well and make both your mum as well as your ... uh ... dad very proud of you.

(SHRINK THEN ANXIOUSLY POINTS HIS ARM FIRMLY TOWARDS THE DOOR AFTER WHICH THE BOY RELUCTANTLY GETS UP, GIVES A WAVE OF HAND, AND THEN LEAVES, WITH THE SOUND OF A DOOR SHUTTING. AFTER HE LEAVES, THE SHRINK LOOKS OBVIOUSLY VERY UPSET WHILE BRINGING HIS HANDS UP TO HIS EYES AND SHAKING HIS HEAD FROM SIDE TO SIDE, AS THOUGH REALISING THAT HE COULD ACTUALLY BE THE BOY'S FATHER).

CURTAIN

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