

Vital Signs

A Play

by Jane Martin

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



New York Hollywood London Toronto

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All producers must also show the following credit in all programs distributed in connection with performances of the Play:

"World premiere at the Actors Theatre of Louisville as part of the 1990 Humana Festival of New American Plays."

Vital Signs received a workshop production at Actors Theatre of Louisville from December 5 to 8, 1989. The cast included: Kymberly Dakin, V Craig Heidenreich, Debra Monk, Adale O'Brien, Paul Rogers, Lori Shearer and Pamela Stewart. The stage manager was Frazier W. Marsh.

Vital Signs received its professional premiere production at Actors Theatre of Louisville in the Humana Festival of New American Plays. It opened March 21, 1990 and played through March 31. The cast included: Kymberly Dakin, Randy Danson, V Craig Heidenreich, Adale O'Brien, Paul Rogers, Priscilla Shanks, Pamela Stewart and Myra Taylor. The stage manager was Frazier W. Marsh, the scenic designer was Paul Owen, the lighting designer was Victor En Yu Tan, the sound designer was Mark Hendren, props master was Mark Bissonnette, and the costume designer and dramaturg was Marcia Dixy.

Many thanks to Richard Trigg for use of his premiere production photograph in this acting edition.
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SETTING: The stage is empty except for three chairs. One is overstuffed, massive, providing sitting areas on the arms and back with a matching hassock in front of it. One is a rocking chair. One is a vinyl fifties kitchen chair. The surround is black.

Director's Note

Vital Signs is performed by six women and two men. Though the play is a series of monologues, there is constant interaction between its cast members. Some pieces are played directly to audience members using them as characters. Some are played to other actors. Some are performed as internal monologues. In some pieces, such as "Nintendo Woman" and "Cocaine Hotline", non-speaking actors create the world of a video game arcade or office with mimed characters. Occasionally a piece has the element of a duologue with exchanged lines. Often other actors are onstage listening to another actor work. The more a director uses these means to provide variety and a sense of ensemble, the more powerful and funny the evening becomes.

The play uses only three chairs with no other scenery. The only prop is a tray of hor d'oeuvres. The costumes should be the actors' own rehearsal clothes. Lights shift to provide atmosphere, but there are no blackouts until the end of the act and the end of the evening.

Recorded music is useful behind certain pieces, such as "Encyclopedia Salesmen," "Truck Stop," "One Moment," and "Endings," but should not be overused. Flow is everything. The pieces should follow each other quickly, preventing, when possible, internal applause.

Characterization is important but should not give the impression of broad strokes or heavy use of dialect. The director will find that what gives this work its special flavor is the quick internal movement from comedy to something more painful, or vice versa, in a single two-minute piece.

The order has been determined to provide variety, help the pieces inform each other, and provide a movement toward a somewhat darker coloration by evening's end.

An appendix of four other pieces is provided as possible substitutions if cast composition would make them useful.

BEGINNINGS

A WOMAN sits on the back of the overstuffed chair with her feet on the seat. Also onstage are the CHARACTERS for the two pieces to follow. THEY listen.

So, uh, invariably I'm uh, well, better at the uh ... well I'm better at the start, at the beginning ... or so I'm, well, generally told that uh, that I am ... at the beginning ... of ... of ... well I guess almost anything. Affairs ... jobs, absolutely on jobs ... trips, always better the first hour on trips ... hors d'oeuvres, never want anything after the hors d'oeuvres ... it's uh ... well, I guess it's a, you know, a pattern ... they usually tell me. So. See at the beginning I never, ever seem to know what I'm ... It all seems very ... full of possibilities ... very romantic ... very ... and then when I'm still thinking that I find out I'm in the middle ... well for me the middle is ... well I experience flight syndrome ... middle panic ... middle muddle ... and uh, characteristically the middle seems pointless ... and of course no one likes being around someone feeling pointless so actually it's the end. But ah ... strangely enough ... well the end ... I don't mind the end because uh ... well the end is that much closer to the beginning ... so uh ... so I'm terrifically relieved

... really ... because I know I'll shine in the beginning, which makes me more fun at the end. Sort of. So honestly ... to be fair ... I ... well. I try to, you know, warn people that the beginning is in a way, well, the end. But it doesn't help because well, and this, this is the uh bad part, I'm usually attracted to linear thinkers who like to uh, move forward, so we never stay in the beginning so it uh ... it uh ... doesn't work out.

SUPREME LIGHT

A WOMAN kneels beside a MAN sleeping on his back on the floor.

WOMAN. Hi, I've got sort of a moral dilemma, can I counsel with you? Our supreme light and pillar of universal enlightenment, he of the thousand eyes, Uraja Pradesh Mahavira, may he radiate forever, who has gathered the disciples of joy from every state and sixteen nations to build his temple in Butte, Montana, has received vibrations from on high that his German shepherd, Rusty, wishes to lie with me. No, really. I know this body is but the cup for the river that is always running and that pleasure is the gift of the material self for the delectation of the spirit of others but this kind of pisses me off. Look, I sold my Nash Rambler and rendered up the money. I made over the checking account and accepted the daughter of delighted poverty ring. I have sung the fifteen simplicities over and over on six months of latrine gift, and chanted with full heart while we hauled the four hundred tons of creek rock to build the Palace of World Peace and Erotic Meditations but this is where I draw the line.

MAN. Nine generations ...

WOMAN. Sure, nine generations of supreme ones inhabit each micro-iota of my master's words but I was born in Trenton, New Jersey, and there is one doo-doo I don't step in.

MAN. Laura!

WOMAN. So I guess what I'm saying is this: I'm giving you my parabolic prayer rug and beads of the sixth union. I'm setting fire to my tent and bedroll. I ritually break the mantra thread that ties me to the universe to come and I'm blowing this joint, Larry. What I want is a Coors beer, some French fried onion rings, and the first Methodist church I can find. Rudyard Kipling was right about never-the-twain. Don't take up a religion your mother can't spell.

COCAINE HOTLINE

The entire COMPANY creates an office mime as background for MS. BOTTENDORF:

Good morning, Cocaine Hotline, Ms. Bottendorf here to help you break the cycle of despair. Uh, huh. Uh, huh. Uh, huh. Well, I don't really see anything we can do if you're going to behave like that. (*SHE hangs up.*) Will somebody get me a Diet Pepsi for God's sake before I start screaming and trying to get my tongue into my Panasonic pencil sharpener. What kind of society is this!

(PHONE rings, SHE answers it.)

Good morning, Cocaine Hotline. Uh, huh. Uh, huh. Uh, huh. Hold it right there. All right, Cornelia, you called for advice. I am giving you advice. Tell him you are flat out going to leave his ass. Uh, huh. Well, that's just too bad. Tell him when he wants help he can write you a letter. Tough Tootsie Rolls, Cornelia. You have to cut off the sex, cut off the money. Figure out the one thing he wants, Cornelia, and cut that mother off! If you do not act, and I mean before the sun sets, he's going to nosebleed his life all over your prairie-pattern quilts. Yes, well take it

or leave it. I have three calls waiting. (*Hangs up. Stands up.*) I would like to say to all of you here at Cocaine Hotline that we are going down, going down with the ship, and we are out of Diet Pepsi, folks. No society can help itself without a constant supply of diet drinks that you can count on. I'm taking a john break. Let me know if the country buys the farm.

30 HOURS

One actress sits on the hassock and speaks to other ACTORS on the stage.

Everybody has about 30 hours of conversation, after that it's all reruns. Ordinarily, a person can do about twelve hours on their family, ten on their past, five on their divorce, three on their present and maybe forty-five minutes of personal philosophy. My theory is that almost anyone can be interesting for three dates which means you've usually been to bed with him before you discover he's a tape. The best I ever met rang in at 200 hours but it was all on Suzuki motorcycles which kept putting me to sleep. "Crankers were trued to blah, blah, blah ... intake adapters blah, blah ... carbs on the Honda/Webco 350 blah, blah, blah." It made me pray for an awkward silence. Every ten years we ought to be heard by a Board of Examiners who should tattoo a conversational rating to our foreheads. That way you could *get out* before it *ran out*. Ever try ten years of marriage on six hours of conversation? If it weren't for gossip, children or grocery shopping, ninety percent of all marriages would be conducted in silence. The only ones without a limit are deeply neurotic, desperately narcissistic, drop-dead alcoholic or have dangerous criminal

minds. All in all, it's a bleak picture. (*Pause.*) Say something.

LOTTO

This ACTRESS enters from offstage and plays the piece with an AUDIENCE MEMBER.

I got the Lotto. I got it. I got all six numbers. Shhhh. I haven't showed this to nobody. Shhhh. Here ... you hold the ticket ... help me check it out. Shoot, I looked a hundred times but Lord, I don't trust myself. (*Calls out the numbers.*) Six, three, one. They say it's \$5.5 million in twenty-one installments. Lord in Heaven! I work down to the Hercules Cleaning Service. Well, it's a very rewarding thing to remove filth. People like you to do it. My husband, Joe, he's a retired insurance adjustor, and he does part-time lawn mower repair. We have a 1947 DeSoto. Original upholstery. That's our pride an' joy. They say that woman won ten million last year picked her up a bad nervous condition. She's in a peck of tax trouble and divorced her a husband she had thirty years. Joe and me we worked all these years to get our lives right. We're orderly in that way. I don't think they like you to clean or drive some old DeSoto with money like that. Seven, four, nine. Oh, my. My Momma, rest her soul, she always said, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," "Don't trade the cow for a milk truck," things like that.

(Pause.)

Here, you keep it. You're more young and better situated for it. Put it in your purse. Shhhh. Go on. Do what I told you. Go on. And don't tell Joe. That's the way we are. He leaves the details to me.

COLD WAR

This piece is played to other ACTORS who find her political stance slightly embarrassing.

Gee, really this ...ummm ... sort of ... well, embarrassing but ... all right, straight out ... I miss the Cold War. I do. I liked ... oh, God ... I liked being afraid of the Russians. At least it made Reagan bearable, you know? Now, they're, gosh, the two of them, like artifacts, you know, like old newsreels, but they're still playing in my theatre. It's like having to tell your President his fly is open. Pssss, George ... get out of the tank, George ... it's tacky to ride around in a tank now, trust me. But with no Russians, boy, who am I going to hate now? Myself probably. Boy, I used to say to myself, Cathy, boy are you behaving like a jerk. You are really screwed up. Boy, Cathy are you ever leading an unexamined life, but ... who cared, you know, because BOOM! Adios! Nuclear winter.

Now I'm going to have to live with myself, you know? Christ, who needs it? Instantaneously, no Lenin, no Marx, no Communism. The first thing they wanted from us, buddy was a McDonald's. A McDonald's. Think about it. You know what that means. It means we're going to be up to our ass in styrofoam cups and pop tops.

One world, right? One big mouth is more like it. One giant mouth, world tongue, universal craw snarfing up everything in the refrigerator and then, then, boy, we'll start in on each other *again*, only meaner and hungrier and drugged up to our eyeballs until we're living in a pig wallow, cutting each other's throats over potato peelings and calling it an inalienable right.

Hey, remember the graffiti on the Berlin wall? "We came, we saw, we did a little shopping." Sure shopping, they should have shopping, but ... I don't know ... maybe I'm empathy dead. I'm scared. It's stupid. I'm scared, O.K.? Don't look at me that way, I'm a liberal. O.K., I'm wrong. Tell me what to think.

TRUCK

All the WOMEN sit or stand around the overstuffed chair. They are the truck stop's cafe employees. A male ACTOR enters and takes their picture with a flash camera.

Me? I waitressed at the only all-nude truck stop in West Virginia. It kinda caught on. We was all jaybird naked, cooks, cashiers, bus girls, the bunch of us. We'd flip to see who worked the tables near the front door in December. Guy pulls a twelve-cyclinder, 456 horsepower Detroit Diesel into the lot. Slides into my booth in a white silk suit with a tie with a diamond stud. Says he's the one, the only, Reverend Billy Frost, got him a sixteen wheel ministry an' the home phone number of the Holy Ghost. "Good evenin' little lady," he says, "I take you to be in the Garden of Eden or tied to the spokes of the wheel of fire. Now I'll have me a decaf Cappucino and a side order of small curd cottage cheese, an' when I leave, senorita, you're invited to ride." Slipped his silk coat over my shoulders, offered me his arm, walked me past the truckers to an all white rig, says "Resurrection Express" in letters of flame. "Climb up, little lady," he says, "leave the dust of the road behind you." His eyes were serene as a hawk on an updraft, so I did.

Sang hymns, shouted scripture, and screwed me seven times on the way to Laramie, Wyoming. Left me by the side of the road at this deep pan pizza parlor run by two Koreans. (*SHE approaches a male actor.*) Disappointed? Well, that's a real luxury in a life like mine, sailor. I got to generally trust any human being ain't armed or got blood on their shoes. Tell you what. Buy me a beer and give me a ride into Palm Springs, you can tell me *your* modus operandi.

ARBY'S

The ACTRESS sits speaking to several other women.

WOMAN. Honey, what the tight asses never teach you in school is when the end is. I'd known that I'd saved me about twelve years in two marriages. My second finally sat me down said, "Marjorie Ann, you been screwin' around on me for seven years, haven't slept with me in six months, haven't talked to me in ten days, now I filed for divorce this afternoon, I figured I better tell you so you'd notice when I'm gone." (*Laughs.*)

I'm a good lookin' woman an' I have me some fun but I just don't have me a sense of conclusion. They say it ain't over 'til it's over? Hell, with me it ain't over 'til well over when it's over, an' sometimes it's not over 'til two overs over that. (*Laughs.*) I spent three days in Acapulco with a fella was an architect for Arby's Roast Beef. (*Pause. Male ACTOR enters.*)

Hell, I thought those things just sprung up over night like mushrooms, didn't you? (*Laughs.*) He said when you have a structure you see when it fulfills itself and it's just naturally over.

MAN. Like a circle.

WOMAN. He said.

MAN. You draw a circle you know when it's finished.

WOMAN. Honey, I told him the trouble is you'd damn well know that before you started so what the hell's the fascination? Oh, I put me together some odd shapes in my life, darlin', but they never did look nothin' like an Arby's Roast Beef! I start somethin' and then generally move on when somethin' shiny catches my eye, like a crow does. It's just one lopsided damn thing sittin' next to another lopsided damn thing, how I see it. Don't fit together any way you can make sense of, do they?

Third day with the architect we was waitin' for the elevator and outta nowhere he asked me to marry him! Honey, I was so God-damned surprised I said yes. (*Male ACTOR exits.*) Elevator door opens, he steps in ... Fell fourteen floors down an empty shaft. Now he lived, but the subject of marriage never came up again. (*Laughs.*)

Drawing the circle. Huh-uh, not my style, darlin'. Honey, I'll just scribble some good lookin' shit 'til I run out of paper. I don't want to see the structure 'til they turn out the lights.

BUSINESS WOMAN

The ACTRESS sits in a chair near the audience and plays the piece to an older male patron.

I don't feel there's a significant difference between us on this issue, Mr. Carlyle. I am willing to artificially depress our prices forcing you into a price war because it is my educated guess that our pockets are a little deeper and our markets a little better situated and we don't have the same need for fluidity and capital that a little bird tells me you do. There is, as I'm sure you're aware, a natural process of selection in business as my father used to say, "When it's time to go, it's time to go." Now in my opinion, you've had your innings and in a nice way, a very nice way, you've become a superfluous and even, though I don't like to say this, an inhibiting factor in an expanding market. Your options, Mr. Carlyle, are to sell or fold. It's Florida time, Mr. Carlyle, which can't be too unpleasant a prospect given the time you already spend on the links. Well, I've got a lunch and you've got a lunch so when you've run this by your people give me a call. Oh, one more thing. I greatly appreciate the fact that during all those years we worked together you were punctilious about treating me as an equal and colleague and not simply as your daughter. You

can be assured in the changed circumstances that I will do the same for you. Sorry, have to run.

QUALITY TIME

EVERYONE exits except the ACTRESS who plays the piece alone on an imaginary playground.

Anna, Anna, honey, the slides's hot, honey, don't go down the slide without your bathing suit. No, no, no.

Billy, Billy! Get out from behind the swings! Further back, even further. You know what Mommy told you about swings.

Anna, Anna, some people don't like to see us without our bathing suits. Sick as that may be. Come get a towel from Mommy, sweetie.

Greg! Let go of her hair! Yes, I know it's your truck. No, she doesn't like it, Greg, she is screaming.

Little girl? Give him back the truck, darling, he's ruthless. It is his truck. Give him back the ...

Anna, not in the sand pile ... yes I know we do that at home ... Oh, my God, Anna ... cover it up ... put sand over it ... with your foot ... no, don't pick it up! Billy, make Anna put it down ... Billy... not with the plastic bucket, Billy ...

Greg, stop it! She doesn't want to be in the tire. Good. No. She doesn't want to be on the see-saw. No sand fights, Billy. Greg, do not

brush her off there. Because her mommy doesn't like it.

Anna, not in the fountain!

Billy, stop picking at it, it's a scab.

Do not hit foreign mommies, Greg. I'm sorry.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

Billy! (*A pause. SHE watches the carnage.*)

Quality time.

IMPOTENCE

A WOMAN sits on the overstuffed chair talking to another ACTRESS sitting on the hassock. In the middle of the piece a MAN enters and lies down on the floor. The PERFORMER moves to the man and lies down as if she were in bed with him.

The moving van pulls away. I monitor myself for a reaction. What? What am I feeling? In point of fact I'm ecstatic. The marriage is gone, he's gone, the furniture is gone, I feel great! Then I make a mistake and look in the mirror. Is anybody going to find *this* attractive? I get instantaneous depression. I'm ugly. Not to worry. My first week I have three dates. All right, two of them were married, but I'm still counting them as dates. I'm enthusiastic and sleep with all of them. It turns out they have one thing in common. They're all impotent. This is what they don't tell you when you get a divorce. Melly, what is going on? I worried available men would be ego-monsters dripping arrogance and command; they're not, they are sweet, vulnerable guys who have caught some kind of sexual flu. They're in agony, they weep, they rage, you have to take Kleenex to bed. I decide all men from 10 p.m. to 7 a.m. are living on an outpatient basis—poor babies! They must

exist in this paroxysm of dread. Completely focused on what they can't control. Totally defined by an irrational muscle. Passionately believing it's all that matters. Found out despite the rest of their lives. One of them told me it was like cradling a corpse between his legs. And my job ... my job is to fix it. Or else to console the inconsolable. And all of this ... all of his pain, all of my responsibility, locked in a horrified panic reaction to the absence of six seconds of abandon. And this, Melly, this is my dream of sexual freedom. Gosh, it makes me long for the security of a bad marriage.